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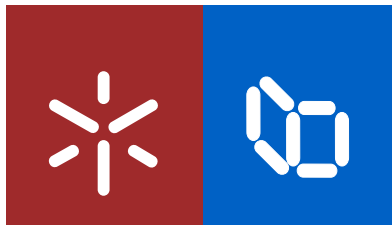
Célia Maria Silva Oliveira

**From the Margins into the Mainstream:  
Roy Williams and Black British Theatre  
(1995 – 2010)**

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Dissertação de Mestrado  
Mestrado em Estudos Ingleses

Trabalho realizado sob a orientação da  
**Professora Doutora Francesca Clare Rayner**

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## **Abstract**

### **From the Margins into Mainstream: Roy Williams and Black British Theatre (1995 – 2010)**

This thesis examines the work of the black British playwright Roy Williams, exploring the place that this dramatist occupies in contemporary theatre, which has undergone great changes in terms of the themes of its plays as well as in terms of its playwrights.

Starting his career in fringe venues, Williams has gained visibility and gradually entered the mainstream, presenting his work at some of London's most influential theatres for a more ethnically-diverse audience. These productions have consistently been met with critical acclaim.

Williams' work has brought to the stage a set of themes that reflect previously unexplored areas of contemporary Britain in theatre, such as racism and stories of local black communities. Therefore, Williams' work explores key aspects of multiracial Britain and the issues raised by multiculturalism.

The plays are grouped in terms of themes and this division explores the evolution of Williams' career from the margins to the mainstream. Therefore, the first chapter, "Where do we Belong? The Jamaica Set", deals with the dramatist's early plays that focus on the Jamaica legacy. Chapter two, "Constructions of Britishness: Where do we Fit in?", explores the construction of identity in current Britain from a black perspective. The final chapter, "The State of the Nation", discusses the dramatist's approach to Britain nowadays through plays that discuss current configurations of the British nation.



## Resumo

### **Do Teatro Alternativo para o *Mainstream*: Roy Williams e o Teatro Negro Britânico (1995 – 2010)**

Esta tese examina o trabalho do dramaturgo britânico negro, Roy Williams, explorando o lugar que este ocupa no teatro contemporâneo que, por sua vez, sofreu grandes alterações, quer no que diz respeito aos temas abordados nas suas peças, quer nos seus dramaturgos.

Tendo começado a sua carreira em salas de teatro experimental, Williams ganhou visibilidade e, gradualmente, foi entrando no *mainstream*, apresentando o seu trabalho em algumas das salas de teatro mais influentes de Londres para uma audiência etnicamente mais diversificada. Estas produções foram sendo consistentemente aclamadas pela crítica.

O trabalho de Williams trouxe para o palco um conjunto de temas que refletem áreas ainda por explorar acerca da Grã-Bretanha contemporânea: racismo e histórias de comunidades negras locais. Por isso, o trabalho de Williams explora aspetos fundamentais da Grã-Bretanha multirracial e temas que são levantados pelo multiculturalismo.

As peças estão agrupadas por temática e esta divisão explora a evolução da carreira de Williams. Desta forma, o primeiro capítulo, “Onde pertencemos? – O Conjunto Jamaicano”, aborda as primeiras peças do dramaturgo que focam o legado da Jamaica. O capítulo dois, “Construções de Como Ser Britânico – Onde nos Integramos?”, explora a construção de identidade na Grã-Bretanha contemporânea numa perspetiva negra. O capítulo seguinte, e último, “O Estado da Nação”, discute a abordagem da Grã-Bretanha atual através de peças que discutem o atual estado da nação.





## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Resumo</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Roy Williams: a Dramatic Trajectory .....	2
A Brief Overview of Post-War Black Theatre .....	9
Roy Williams and Black British Writing .....	13
Review of Existing Critical Literature on Roy Williams .....	15
Structure of the Thesis .....	16
<b>Chapter One: Where do we Belong? – The Jamaica Set</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<i>The No Boys Cricket Club</i> (1996) .....	17
<i>Starstruck</i> (1998) .....	19
<i>The Gift</i> (2000) .....	21
Common features of the plays .....	22
Identity and Constructing the Self .....	24
A Sense of Belonging and Memory .....	30
Family .....	34
<b>Chapter Two: Constructions of Britishness – Where do we Fit in?</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<i>Lift Off</i> (1999) .....	40
<i>Clubland</i> (2001) .....	46
<b>Chapter Three: The State of the Nation</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<i>Fallout</i> (2003) .....	51
<i>Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads</i> (2002) .....	59
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>68</b>
<b>Selected Bibliography</b> .....	<b>72</b>



## Introduction

*I have been often asked if I mind being called a  
'black' playwright, or do I address myself as one?  
The fact is, I am a playwright, full stop: nothing  
more, nothing less.*

**Roy Williams**, *Introduction to Plays I*

This Masters thesis is centred on the role that the black British playwright Roy Williams plays in current black British theatre in particular and in the theatrescape in general. The thesis reflects on changes in contemporary British theatre, by focusing on the increasing importance of black British playwrights, and Williams and as an example of one of the most successful of these black playwrights. A selection of his stage plays was chosen for analysis to give an indication of the evolution of the playwright's career from the theatrical margins into the theatrical mainstream.

The thematic area of the thesis was chosen due to the fact that the British theatre has undergone, in recent years, a change in terms of the themes of its plays as well as in terms of the playwrights who write for the theatre. In the past fifteen years (1995- 2010) plays previously only performed in black theatres have gained a new visibility and gradually entered the mainstream, being staged at some of London's most influential theatres for a more ethnically-diverse audience. These productions have consistently been met with critical acclaim.

This new prominence of Black Theatre has brought to the stage a new set of themes that reflect previously unexplored areas of contemporary Britain in theatre, such as racism, crime and stories of local black communities. Therefore, black British theatre has explored key aspects of multiracial Britain and the issues that are raised by multiculturalism. In the process, it has also redefined notions of 'political' theatre in parallel with other theatrical movements such as the 'in-  
-yer-face' theatre of the 1990's.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the success of black theatre and black playwrights

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<sup>1</sup> The widest definition of in-  
-yer-face theatre is by Sierz, who defines this theatre as (Sierz: 2000; 4-5) "any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audience are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-  
-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative. [...] The language is usually filthy, the characters talk about unmentionable subjects, take their clothes off, have sex, humiliate each another, experience unpleasant emotions, become suddenly

also highlights problems, such as the funding of plays by black dramatists and the production of plays that are aimed mainly at mainstream audiences, related to the institutionalization and co-option of black drama by the mainstream.

In this contradictory space, Roy Williams appears as a key figure. The playwright has been called (Osborne: 2011; 487) “the most prolific indigenous black dramatist in contemporary British theatre”. He represents aspects of contemporary culture from a black perspective and has sustained a mainstream visibility that has been acclaimed by audience and critics together, (Osborne: 2011; 487) “consolidating his place in the canon of British theatre history”.

### **Roy Williams: a Dramatic Trajectory**

Writing came inadvertently to Roy Williams. Roy Samuel Williams was born in 1968 in the United Kingdom to a four sibling Afro-Caribbean family. He was brought up in Notting Hill, London, in a single-parent home, after his father left when he was two years old. As a teenager, attending the Henry Compton Comprehensive Secondary School, he faced some difficulties. As he admits: (Williams: 2002; ix) “I was a hopeless academic at school. Anything that required me to use my imagination like English or Art, I was good at, but in practical subjects like Maths, Geography – the important stuff – I was useless”. To counteract his difficulties, his mother arranged for him to have a private tutor every Saturday, informing him that if he resisted, he (Williams: 2002; ix) would be “packed off to stay with relatives in Jamaica and attend school there”. His tutor, who would have a great influence for Williams’ choice of a career in theatre, was Don Kinch, who, besides being a teacher, was also an actor, writer and director with the black company Staunch Poets and Players. As a result, according to Williams, (Williams: 2002; ix) “every now and then, instead of our usual Saturday lesson, Don would go and work with the actors on their latest production and I would tag along. I didn’t mind, anything that would get me away from doing my Maths homework was fine with me”.

Meeting Kinch was a turning point in Williams’ life because he (Williams: 2002; ix) “was hooked” after his first real experience with theatre apart from attending occasional productions with the rest of his school. Before then, theatre for him was (Williams: 2002; ix) “a place that a lot of white people went to, to watch a lot of other white people running about in tights, talking in a funny language that was written by this other white bloke called Shakespeare”. The reading of *Class Enemy* (1978) by Nigel Williams and *Barbarians* (1977) by Barrie Keefe also made

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violent. At its best, this kind of theatre is so powerful, so visceral, that it forces audience to react: either they feel like fleeing the building or they are suddenly convinced that it is the best thing they have ever seen, and want all their friends to see it too. It is the kind of theatre that inspires us to use superlatives, whether in praise or in condemnation”.

Williams realise that there was more to drama than he had imagined. As he comments, (Williams: 2002; ix) “these were plays, performed in the theatre, about people I knew and the world I lived in”.

He left school at the age of sixteen and in 1985 he attended a Performing Arts course at Kingsway College. For Williams, the course (Williams: 2002; x) “seemed like a laugh, it was something to do and I was good at it, so I decided to stick with acting for a while”. In 1986, he joined the Cockpit Youth Theatre, where every actor had to devise, write, act and direct all of his work. During that time, he joined Theatre Centre for a period of eighteen months as a professional actor, even though he had not studied acting at a drama school. At Theatre Centre, he worked with writers such as Philip Osment, Noel Greig and Lin Coghlan, which reignited his love of writing. He also attended an evening writing workshop with Noel Greig, the company’s resident writer at the time, and after a few sessions he started to write his first play – *Luke for Gary* – which was based on a scene he had improvised with his friend Michael Lowe. Williams writes (Williams: 2002; x) that “the piece was about two schoolboys, best mates, whose friendship is threatened when everyone assumes they are gay”. For the next two years, Roy Williams worked at the stage door of the Royalty Theatre in London’s West End and it was then that he (Williams: 2002; xi) “decided to take my writing seriously”.

In 1992, he was accepted as a student on a writer’s course at Rose Bruford College, Kent, using *Luke for Gary* for his application. He graduated in 1995 with a first-class honours degree in Writing and his second play *The No Boys Cricket Club* (1996). Following the suggestion of his teacher, Gilly Fraser, he sent the play to as many theatre companies as possible. Within two months of graduating from Rose Bruford College, he had received calls from three of the theatre companies to which he had sent copies of his play. Meanwhile, the BBC commissioned a radio play that he had written at Rose Bruford called *Homeboys* for their Young Writers festival. In the end, it was the Theatre Royal Stratford East, a theatre that is explicitly connected with black writing and mainly black audiences, that produced *The No Boys Cricket Club* but Williams had also received commissions to write for the Royal Court and Hampstead Theatre. As the playwright points out: (Williams: 2002; xi) “Talk about reaction. I guessed I was good at this writing lark after all”. Williams’ debut play had good reviews, a very good acceptance in the audience and (Williams: 2002; xii) “came out around the time when there seemed to be a new generation of playwrights coming through”. These playwrights included David Eldridge, Judy Upton and Rebecca Prichard, among many others. With his debut play, Williams took the main stage by storm and the play (Sierz: 2006; 179) “articulates his characteristic preoccupations, being ambitious in theme, imaginative in form and, most crucially, convincing in its characterisation and dialogue”.

*Starstruck* (1998), Williams' second play, was commissioned two and a half years after the playwright's first stage success with *Stratford East* but was performed at The Tricycle Theatre because *Stratford East* was being rebuilt. As with the first play, (Williams: 2002; xii) "good reviews followed a lovely response from the audience", which won Roy Williams three awards. Both *The No Boys Cricket Club* and *Starstruck* broach Jamaica and the effect that immigration had on people who migrated to Britain as well as their descendants and the way diaspora affected their sense of identity. This issue of Jamaica and the life of West Indians in London would also be the main theme in *The Gift* (2000), a play that would close this phase in Williams' theatrical career. In these three plays, (Sierz: 2006; 179) "the tension is between the past and the present, between dreams of leaving the West Indies and the reality of life in England".

In 1999, *Lift Off*, was produced at the Royal Court Theatre and it can be considered Williams' (Williams: 2002; xii) "first 'London' play". With this play, Williams starts to explore contemporary issues, particularly the reasons why white teenagers might want to emulate black ones. With this play, Williams won the prestigious George Devine Award. The following year, Williams presented *Clubland* (2001), one of his most personal plays, as it is based heavily on experiences going out clubbing with his friends in his twenties. The playwright points out that the characters in *Lift Off* and *Clubland* (Sierz: 2006; 175) "could be the same characters, but ten years later". The characters have the same type of relationship in both plays but there is a much more mature tone in the play *Clubland* when the characters search for their identity as young adults, trying to dismiss the preconceived ideas of what it means to be a young black man in Britain nowadays.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the characters manage to live their own separate lives, moving from being a member of a group to becoming an individual. His main aim in the play was to explore the stereotypes of black people, pointing to many aspects of cultural identity, namely what it means to be black in contemporary Britain. In both plays, the characters understand that the stereotype of black men is dangerously limiting and that reality is much more complex than preconceived ideas allow. Looking at the myth of multiracial Britain, the plays question the equality amongst its citizens as well as the behaviour of both white and black teenagers. 2002 was a mark in Williams' career. He became writer in residence at the Royal Court Theatre and produced one of his most popular plays *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002) at the National Theatre (Lyttelton).<sup>3</sup> The play was inspired by a situation that the author witnessed at a local pub – a group of football fans watching a game

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<sup>2</sup> In both plays there is a strong relationship of friendship between a black and a white character. In both plays the two characters have been friends since school and the black young man has great power over the white young man in a way that the audience witnesses emulation from the white character towards the black one.

<sup>3</sup> Revivals of *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* took place in 2004 at the Cottesloe space, National Theatre and in 2006 and 2007 by Pilot Theatre and national tour.

between England and Germany in the European Championships, chanting, singing and shouting racist words at the German players. This situation made the playwright write a play (Williams: 2004; x) “not just simply about race, but about British Nationalism” and about what it means to be British in the twenty-first century. This focus on ‘nation’ represents Williams’ move from being a black dramatist to being a British black playwright. As a black dramatist, the emphasis of Williams’ plays was black identity as well as issues that were concerned mainly with black people. On the other hand, by focusing on ‘nation’, Williams explores themes that concern every socio-cultural community in Britain, questioning the role they play and the place they occupy in British society. Therefore, Williams ceases to be the playwright whose work is exclusively about the black community and embraces the task of broaching issues that concern society as a whole.

Sport plays an important role in the play, especially football violence, which is presented as a frustrated form of male bonding and a way to express contradictory feelings about national identity.

Williams had a very profitable year in 2002. Other than writing stage plays, Williams wrote for the television and for the radio. For BBC Television, he wrote *Babyfather* (2002) and *Offside* (2002), which won him a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Award for Best Schools Drama. For BBC Radio 4, Williams wrote *Tell Tale* (2002).

With *Fallout* (2003), staged at the Royal Court Theatre, Downstairs, Williams returned to the world of black youth, presenting the fallout from the murder of a young black boy, an episode reminiscent of the high-profile Damilola Taylor case.<sup>4</sup> He started writing the play after reading about a girl witness, codenamed Bromley, leaving the trial tumultuously after a difficult cross-examination. As Roy Williams points out, he (Williams: 2008; iii) “was interested in trying to get into the mindset of these youths, to explore what kind of Britain they are growing up in”. However, by presenting the characters in this play realistically, with all their confusion and violence visible, Williams suffered criticism, as he points out (Sierz: 2006; 186):

I knew there would be a risk, me being black and writing about black kids who commit murder and mug people, but that shit is happening out there. And if I don’t write about it I feel I’m just as bad as everyone else who’s not paying any attention. When you read the play, it’s so easy to dismiss them. But if you stay with it, you’ll see that what I’m saying is don’t take them at face value – just listen to them a bit more. And you’ll see how

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<sup>4</sup> The Damilola Taylor case refers to the murder of ten-year-old Nigerian schoolboy, Damilola Taylor, who bled to death fifteen minutes after being stabbed in the thigh by two teenagers, who were later accused of manslaughter. Considered to be a racist murder, the death of the child in North Peckham Estate shocked the British society.



scared and vulnerable they are despite their front. Simply by putting these young kids on stage at the Royal Court, whose main audience is white and middle-class, raises the question of what are we going to do about violence in society.<sup>5</sup>

Williams decided to take the risk in reinforcing the preconceived idea that all black men are violent. The author's aim was to present the audience with what might have been an unknown reality, particularly for mainstream audience. Even though members of mainstream audience and members of fringe audiences live in the same society, they do not often meet each other publicly and often do not have a real perception of the other's reality. Thus, it was the playwright's objective to lead one community to meet and be aware of the reality of the other community in order to recreate a post-colonial vision of society.

The playwright calls attention to the part this society must take in the prevention of violence and racist violence in particular. Society in general must leave the position of bystander and start acting towards the resolution of the problem that violence has become. Not only do public institutions have the responsibility to take seriously this issue and take measures accordingly but also culture plays an important role in the awareness of this problem. Culture, and particularly theatre, has the responsibility and the means to call society's attention to such social questions. Theatre thus, through the voices of its playwrights and their plays, assumes a role of social intervention, sensitizing populations and appealing for a more active behaviour from audience members towards this issue.

In this way, theatre, as part of the British cultural institutions, aims to create wider audience access, greater ethnic diversity and a more innovative product. As Sierz (2011; 2) remarks critically, "In May 2004, Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell published 'Government and the Value of Culture', an essay in which she argued that 'Culture has an important part to play in defining and preserving cultural identity – of the individual, of communities, and of the nation as a whole'".

In short, British theatre had the mission to be something of a social worker, opening the doors to new audiences and soothing the anguish of social exclusion, at the same time as it discussed the notion of being British and English from the perspective of black playwrights. This discussion was based on notions of cultural hybridity, a sense of multiple identities and a formulation of identity as a work in progress. In the era of globalisation, when it would be expected to be less important because people and culture are influenced by cultural manifestations of cultures from all over the world, the key question remained what it meant to be British and what defines being British.

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<sup>5</sup> This is an excerpt of an interview that Roy Williams gave Aleks Sierz on February 9<sup>th</sup> 2004.

Therefore, bearing this in mind, playwrights have been deeply involved in writing and rewriting the nation, as it is constantly questioned, contested and qualified implicitly or explicitly. Nowadays, theatre has become an instrument of presenting and questioning social problems. It is important to lead people and institutions to reflect on the problems that concern society and theatre can work as another instrument to reach people faster because it can play the role of consciousness-raiser and contribute to a potential resolution of social problems.

Additionally, in *Fallout*, Williams explores the world of the Metropolitan Police in the light of the McPherson report. The force was accused of being institutionally racist after the poor handling of the high-profile Stephen Lawrence case. With this play, Williams (Sierz: 2006; 186) “provocatively examined the clash between the ‘two worlds’ of street society and police society in a way that gives comfort to neither side”. Williams’ aim was to present society as he sees it and (Sierz: 2006; 186) “that’s one step towards changing it”. As Williams’ plays portray everyday reality, with its problems and with characters that audience members recognise as someone that could live next to them, audience members can feel compelled to act. A stage play, although necessarily a fiction, may be the trigger to lead to action because audience members see on stage the reflection of aspects of their daily lives.

Two years later, Roy Williams continued with the world of British youth. Youth morality, teenagers’ wishes, preoccupations as well as gang life and a life of crime are some of the themes broached in the following plays. *Little Sweet Thing* (2005) was staged at New Wolsey, Ipswich, Nottingham Playhouse and Birmingham Rep, and *Slow Time* (2005) was commissioned by the National Theatre Department of Education and has toured schools since its premiere. With this educational play, Williams’ aim was to warn teenagers about life in prison and keep them away from a life of crime. Other commissions for teenage audiences include *Baby Girl* (2007) for the National Theatre and *There’s Only One Wayne Matthews* (2007) for Polka’s Children Theatre.

In 2007, Williams wrote his two main adaptations for the stage. *Days of Significance* (2007), staged at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, is, appropriately enough given the setting, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598/99). With this play, Williams broaches the war in Iraq and its effect on ordinary citizens. Moreover, he explores the relationships that young people maintain with each other, their values and the way they value themselves and others. *Absolute Beginners* (2007), staged at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, is an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Colin MacInnes (1959). Using the 1950’s as background, Williams explores the everyday issues that teenagers face in a more colourful and increasingly multiracial, post-war Britain. In the same year, Williams wrote *Out of the Fog* (2007) for the Almeida Theatre and *Joe Guy* (2007), staged at the New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, and Soho Theatre, London.

In 2007, Williams adapted E. R. Braithwaite's popular novel *To Sir, with Love* (1959), following the adaptation, in 2009, of *Choice of Straws* (1965) by the same author for the radio.

Aside from the rural setting of *Josie's Boy* (Red Ladder, 1996) and the plays featuring Jamaican contexts – *The No Boys Cricket Club*, *Starstruck* and *The Gift* in Williams' early work – his work is definitely urban-centred and this urban setting is evident in *Local Boy* (Hampstead Theatre, 2000), *Category B* (Tricycle Theatre, 2009) and *Sucker Punch* (Royal Court, 2010).

Roy Williams, in 2008, rewrote *Fallout* as a screenplay for Channel 4, which was aired as part of the “Disarming Britain” season on urban gun and knife crime. In the same year, the playwright received further recognition with the award of an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for services to drama. The OBE award is the clear recognition of Roy Williams' move into the theatrical mainstream and the general acceptance that he is an important contributor to British culture and theatre in portraying a black perspective of the issues broached on stage. In fact, the OBE is the institutional recognition of Williams not only as a theatre figure but also as a public figure.

Williams' work can be seen within a context of an open-ended social realism, as he tries to portray British society and its dilemmas. By presenting England and Britain as he perceives them, Roy Williams intends to show the reality around him and around the members of the audience without judgement, leading to reflection but not giving, however, any solution to the issues he presents on stage.

Williams has won many awards in his career. His debut play, *The No Boys Cricket Club* (1996), won the Writer's Guild Best New Writer Award in 1996. Two years later, *Starstruck* (1998) received the first Alfred Fagon Award (for theatre in English by writers with Caribbean connections), the 31<sup>st</sup> John Whiting Award for Best New Play and the EMMA (Ethnic Multicultural Media Awards) Award for best play, three major awards. In 1999, *Lift Off* (1999) was joint winner of the George Devine Award in 2000. In 2001, *Clubland* (2001) received the *Evening Standard* Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright. In 2002, *Offside* (2002), a production for BBC Television, was the winner of the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Award for Best Schools Drama. In 2003, *Fallout* (2003) received the first South Bank Show Arts Council Decibel Award, (Sierz: 2006; 177) “given to black or Asian artists in recognition of their contribution to the arts”. This particular award is the institutional recognition that Roy Williams, as a black dramatist, plays an important role in the current theatrescape. This prize shows also that black British drama plays a prominent and significant part in British theatre culture nowadays. Williams' plays have been revived regionally, in prison-theatre contexts and by drama schools.

## A Brief Overview of Post-War Black Theatre

It is important to note that ‘black theatre’ has a history of its own within the history of new theatre writing. As Dierdre Osborne points out in the essay *Writing Black Back: an Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain* (2006a), it was in the Victorian era that the black people became greatly imperceptible in representations of cultural life. Black people were marked and put aside from the ‘civilized’ superior white community and, as this happened, the representation of black culture and inclusion of black characters in the plays became quite scarce, until the late twentieth century, when plays by black playwrights began to be more frequently produced. The flux of immigrants, concentrated primarily in London, that came to Britain to rebuild the country after the destruction caused by the Second World War soon led to the cultural flourishing of Britain and the creation of theatre companies comprising black actors. These theatre companies were Robert Adam and Peter Noble’s London Negro Repertory Theatre, the West Indian Drama Group, founded in 1956 by Joan Clarke and based at the West Indian Students’ Union, and the Ira Aldridge Players, created by Herbert Marshall in 1961 as a permanent black theatre company. Joan Clarke specialized in directing shows with all-black casts and the production of O’Neill’s *Anna Christie* (1959) is considered to be the first show to be performed with black artists only. She also directed *The Insect Play* and *Thunder Rock* with all-black casts for the British Council. It is through these productions that Joan Clark establishes the precedent for the later appearance of female artists in the theatrescape such as Joan-Ann Maynard, Yvonne Brewster, Paulette Randall and Josette Bushell-Mingo.

Contemporary to the previous groups, the Unity Theatre continued with its pre-war policy of contracting black actors to perform black characters roles as well as white characters. However, the staging of the first play written by a black playwright only took place in 1958 with the production of the Trinidadian writer Errol John’s *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, which also won the *Observer* play competition, at the Royal Court. This play also introduced the use of what has been termed as ‘nation language’, which challenged the notion that Standard English was the only language for drama.<sup>6</sup>

Hereafter, many productions by black artists or with black artists took place, produced by (Osborne: 2006a; 77) “the twenty or so black theatre companies that existed in Britain in the 1980s”. However, work in the black theatrescape was quite difficult during this time because (Osborne: 2006a; 76)

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<sup>6</sup> (Osborne: 2006a; 73) “The term Nation Language is an established means of referring to language that has emerged from the Caribbean and was adopted by the Caribbean Arts Movement. The term has been employed in academia and beyond for a couple of decades and is a staple term of reference in any post-colonial literary context”.

the inter-relationship between black theatre and politics in terms of survival has been intimate and precarious for the companies and practitioners involved. This has never been more clearly demonstrated than in the racial politics of subsidy of the mid-1980s and the fate of the TEMBA, when [...] it refused to ‘know its place’ and attempted to expand beyond its ascribed identity of ethnically separate theatre, which resulted in the Arts Council withdrawing its funding and the company’s dissolution.

With the subsidy cuts promoted by the Thatcher government, by the late 1990s, only two black theatre companies had survived.

According to Ponnuswami (2000), it was not only the cut in the funding that dictated the end of so many black theatre companies. Their disappearance was also due to (Ponnuswami *apud* Osborne: 2006a; 77) “the absence of a critical infrastructure” which would discuss and evaluate these performances. This would also require consistent recording of black people’s drama and performance, in the line of that accomplished in other forms of black art, music, film, television, popular culture, among others. The theorization of black theatre in particular needs to be developed, regarding its circumstances, performance and production, because (Osborne: 2006a; 77) “there are changing definitions of blackness in relation to dramatic literature and theatre in Britain which require separate consideration from that of prose and poetry”, not forgetting that performance tends to disappear more quickly than literature.

Black theatre has always been determined by factors such as funding, policy, prejudice and tradition, but these factors alone do not explain the shaping of this type of theatre in Britain. In 1991, Jatinder Verma (1991) indicated that black theatre had to find a voice of its own as well as a theatrical form for itself. Felix Cross (1998), on the other hand, defended that black theatre would have a future only when it could offer something different from that which white theatre has to offer. In fact, it is by presenting different characteristics from white theatre, as was predicted by Verma and Cross, that black theatre gained a prominent place in theatre. By staging situations familiar to fringe audiences, the world of theatre was opened to those that did not have the habit to attend stage plays and those audiences returned to theatres because they saw the representation of their culture and their identity through language, cultural manifestations, dance and music, just to name a few artistic forms.

The new millennium has witnessed an expansion in the staging of Black British plays, especially in the years 2003 and 2004. This is an indication that black theatre is now seen as commercially viable, (Osborne: 2006b; 83) “moving away from the traditional assumptions of its genesis and production as residing primarily within community or non-mainstream theatre

contexts”. There is thus a need for the contemporary black presence on the British stage. However, the inclusion and the perpetuating of indigenous black British drama in mainstream theatres (Osborne: 2006b; 84) “can be neither under-estimated nor over-emphasised. It provides a key cultural site wherein ethnicities and experiences who may not otherwise meet are directly exposed to each other’s cultural practices. Its maintenance is a prerequisite for disabling white elitism in British theatre”. Black drama exposes a mainstream audience, generally white, to aspects of black culture and the black community which are as original as the drama produced by white playwrights. On the other hand, it provides black audiences with the opportunity to see representations of their own culture and aspects of their own identity that have not been constant in the British theatrescape up until now. However, there are some downsides to black theatre becoming commercially viable, such as the audience for black drama becoming mainly composed of white people and alienating black audiences. Moreover, by presenting the productions on big stages, the intimacy that was created in small theatres is somehow lost, which makes it more difficult for audience members to establish intimate connections with the situations presented on stage.

The mapping of black theatre is closely related to the subject-agents who belonged to previously colonized territories that do not fit in the mainstream and its constructed ethnic identity. As contemporary writing performed by white playwrights (Godiwala: 2006; 4) “seldom represents the racial Other” it is in the hands of black playwrights to establish their position and the position of black theatre in the theatre industry. Therefore, (Godiwala: 2006; 4) “it is only by locating themselves in an identity space which reflects the material of their histories, the forms of their own performance, their values and ideologies, their social practices” that black playwrights can write about the black identities and about the members of the black community experiences as well as theirs.

Black dramaturgy is the legacy of immigrant lineage as the makers (actors, playwrights, directors, designers) of this theatre are mainly first and second generation British descendants of immigrants that came to Britain in the programme to rebuild the nation after the Second World War. Identity appears thus as an urgent issue because black playwrights are the writers of diaspora, located in a culture quite different from their original geographical one. Influenced by geographical and cultural location, theatre makers (Godiwala: 2006; 7) “inscribe within British drama a space which is informed by a dual history of belonging”. Black theatre makers enact performance differently as they have their own systems of significations and the predominantly black audience for this type of theatre have specific expectations towards it. For example, they expect to see their own group’s social and cultural codes such as language, gesture, dance and music that are elements of their culture represented in some way onstage.

However, black identity and members of the black community (Godiwala: 2006; 9) “have been historically represented on English stage with the curious ambivalence found famously in Shakespeare’s *Othello*” (1604) resting on the contradictory axis of outsider/insider. Dimple Godiwala (2006; 9) adds that:

the continuing fixities that determine the construction of Black identity in the rigid White space of the British stage often means that although the host culture is often represented in plays by writers of colour, White dramatists seldom represent Black or Asian British cultures or social practices in their work, even though Britain has seen the heterogeneity of the racial presence for several centuries.

The recognition of black theatre as a genre of its own with its own right to be staged (Godiwala: 2006; 11) “arises from the neglect of Black and Asian theatre and culture by White female and male playwrights alike”.

Therefore, some playwrights that have reached the mainstream have put black theatre at the centre of discussion. Such are the cases of Debbie Tucker Green and Kwame Kwei-Armah, who (Osborne: 2006a; 79) “experiment with constructing a black aesthetic”. Roy Williams also appears as an important name in the consolidation of black theatre as he (Osborne: 2006a; 79) “creates social-realist drama in which young black people are centralized, contending with geographies of urban and economic alienation, and the impediment of nurturing adult guidance”. Sol B. River, a playwright based in Leeds, uses *patois* in his work, which (Osborne: 2006a; 79) “hammers naturalistic language usage into a malleability that celebrates black-centred experience despite oppressive socio-historical determinants”. Work such as Sol B. River’s *Two Tracks and Text Me* (2003) (Osborne: 2006a; 79) “overlaps poetry, dance, music and video in a live action/electronic hybrid, juxtaposing telecommunications media and a three-stranded narrative about child abuse”.

Dierdre Osborne, in the essay *The State of the Nation: Contemporary Black British Theatre and the Stage of the UK* (2006b), divides black plays into three main thematic groups which also represent chronological changes. The first group is called ‘incendiary plays’.<sup>7</sup> These plays represent urban working class, black men and their connections with violence and the criminal justice system;<sup>8</sup> these plays also portray inter-generational male conflict and the absence of motherly nurturing. The second group includes comedies that caricature the idea of a steady sexual, national

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<sup>7</sup> The author specifies the following plays: *Fallout* (2003) by Roy Williams, *Elmina’s Kitchen* (2003) by Kwame Kwei-Armah and Mark Norfolk’s *Wrong Place* (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Such is the case of Williams’ *Fallout* (2003)

and racial identity, such as DeObia Oparei's *crazyblackmuthf\*\*\*in'self* (2002) and Kofi Agyemang and Patricia Elcock's *Urban Afro Saxons* (2003). Finally, the 'drama of family ties' composes the third group, regarding the internal and external determinants that corrupt or fortify family ties.<sup>9</sup>

The previous examples show how fringe black theatre is entering the mainstream, influencing it and breaking down the borders that had been established in mainstream theatre and culture.

## Roy Williams and Black British Writing

In 2002, when at the National Theatre, Williams joined a multiracial group of writers that included Richard Bean, Tanika Gupta, David Eldridge, Moira Buffini and Colin Teevan, called the Monsterists. They gathered to produce a manifesto entitled the *Monsterists' Manifesto*. The word 'Monsterist' means 'big' and is a laboured witticism on the French word '*montrer*', which means 'show', 'present'. The aim of this group is to promote new writing in the British theatre. It aims to create opportunities for British theatre writers to create large-scale plays, for large stages. This issue became their central demand because new plays tend to be performed only in small theatres which usually have small stages. The key aesthetic characteristics of a monsterist work are:

Large scale, large concept and, possibly, large cast; the primacy of the dramatic (story showing) over storytelling; meaning implied by action (not by lecture); characters caught in a drama (not there to facilitate a polemic); the exposure of the human condition (not sociology); inspirational and dangerous (not sensationalist<sup>10</sup>).

On a practical level, the members of this movement promote the elevation of new theatre writing from the ghetto of the studio "black box" to the main stage, equal access to financial resources being produced by a living writer and the use of the very best directors and actors for new plays.

By joining this movement, Roy Williams definitely put himself and other Afro-Caribbean and Asian writers at the heart of New British Writing. However, the playwright is quite sceptical about labels, as he points out:

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<sup>9</sup> The plays indicated by the author are: Debbie Tucker Green's *dirty butterfly and born bad* (2003); Courttia Newland's *B is 4 Black* (2003); Dona Daley's *Blest be the Tie* (2004); and Rhashan Stone's *Two Step* (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Eldridge, David, "Massive Attack" (2005) [online]. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). Last accessed: 19 August 2012



I have been often asked if I mind being called a ‘Black’ Playwright, or do I address myself as one. The fact is, I am a playwright, full stop. Nothing more, nothing less. I don’t write because I am black, I write because I am a writer. I can’t be anything else, I don’t want to be anything else. I don’t care what anyone else calls me. Black playwright, coloured playwright, brown playwright, whatever. Just as long as they don’t miss out the word Playwright. Any time I spend worrying about what people are calling me, is time wasted.<sup>11</sup>

In a talk given by Roy Williams at Spread the Word’s *Twilight Zone* day of talks and workshops for writers on 22nd May 2005, at Morley College, the playwright commented that he writes what he writes because no one else does. Nonetheless, he feels that Black Theatre is, at present, in a very healthy state as he knows many writers of colour who have seen their work produced in Britain’s leading theatres over the previous two years. He lists the following playwrights as examples of this renaissance of black writing: Zawe Ashton, Oladipo Agboluaje, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Bola Agbaje, Michael Bhim, Levi David Addai, Linda Brogan, Trevor Williams, Winsome Pinnock, Ashmeed Sohoje, Neil D’Souza, Paven Virk, Amy Evans, Jennifer Farmer, Lydia Adetunji, Debbie Tucker Green, Rex Obano, Tanika Gupta, Atiha Gupta, Paula B Stanic, Marcia Layne, Mark Norfolk, Lorna French, Sheila White, Amber Lone, Rikki Beadle-Blair, Femi Oguns, Grant Buchanan Marshall. The plays produced by these artists offer their own individual perspectives on what it means to be black and British.

Williams is quite fond of the phrase ‘black theatre’ and he thinks that it is needed to ensure they are heard because while the word “theatre” sounds po-faced and white; “‘black theatre’ sounds intriguing, daring”.<sup>12</sup> The genre of black theatre is included in the new writing, which has increasingly been seen around Britain.<sup>13</sup> As Sierz (2011) points out less positively, contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> Williams, Roy, “*Why I write*” (2005) [online]. Available at [www.spreadtheword.org.uk](http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk). Last accessed: 19 August 2012

<sup>12</sup> Williams, Roy, “*Black theatre’s big breakout*” (2009) [online]. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). Last accessed: 19 August 2012

<sup>13</sup> Here I use the phrase ‘new writing’ used by Aleks Sierz in his book “*Rewriting the Nation – British Theatre Today*” (2011). According to this author, new writing is deeply associated to the British cult of the new and thus related with youth. “New writers are young writers, and new writing is work by writers at the start of their careers. Usually, these new writers are in their twenties, and indeed British theatre has often been seduced by the aura of youth. [...] New writing is plays that are written in the great tradition of British text-based theatre, which re-established itself in the brave new state-founded postwar world. [...] Gradually, in British theatre, the notion of new writing – as opposed to the simple fact of a play being new – expanded its meaning until it embraced the sense of being contemporary, original and somehow virtuous. [...] ‘New’ came to stand for a significant, meaningful text that had ‘relevance’ and new plays became the platform in the emerging theatre. [...] New writing is not only contemporary, but it’s a form of fiction”.

theatre is characterized by (Sierz: 2011; 15) “the deluge of the new”, whether contemporary plays, writers or writing festivals. In fact, almost every theatre in Britain, from the National Theatre to many small fringe venues, offers openings to new writers. New black writing is “new” in that it is new not only for the audience, but also for directors, designers and actors for whom black experiences are more distanced.

### **Review of Existing Critical Literature on Roy Williams**

There is little academic material on Roy Williams and what does exist (Osborne: 2011; 504) “is primarily by white scholars or is confined to identity politics themes, examining the plays as dramatic literature without concurrent performance analysis”. Aleks Sierz, in his non-academic reviews and journalistic interviews, refers to Williams as representative of New British Writing. Dierdre Osborne (2011) provides one of the only surveys of existing work on Williams. She points out that Keith Peacock disregards Williams’ (Osborne: 2011; 504) “traceable evolving aesthetic” in his comparative work on Williams. On the other hand, Harry Derbyshire’s study of *Fallout* is (Osborne: 2011; 505) “filtered through a multicultural prism”, conveying a sociological reading separated from aesthetics as if the play were a sociological mirror and not of the theatre. As Derbyshire only uses one theatre review, for Osborne, the reception of the play is ignored as well as its influential sources and performance semiotics. Comparatively, Janelle Reinelt debates *Days of Significance* as (Reinelt *apud* Osborne: 2011; 505) “a series of characterizations that have produced a different, dampened impression of contemporary British writing”. Reinelt’s approach discusses the connection that audience members establish during the performance, while analysing the play in a retelling of the chronological plot. Other important critical work on Roy Williams includes the excellent essay by Elizabeth Barry and William Boles that will be mentioned frequently in this Masters thesis. Finally, Suzanne Scafe, in the essay *Displacing the Centre: Home and Belonging in the Drama of Roy Williams* (2007), (Scafe *apud* Osborne: 2011; 505) “interrogates the socio-cultural circumstances of spatial occupancy in Britain’s theatre venues and its relationship to a dramatist’s vision” in Williams’ early plays. What this existing work reveals is the lack of a wider critical review of William’s work over time, a lack this dissertation aims to deal with through its focus on William’s move from the margins into the mainstream. Analysis of the performance of Williams plays in performance is also lacking in critical work but apart from a few short examples falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

## Structure of the Thesis

In terms of the internal structure of this thesis, the *Introduction* summarizes Roy Williams' biography as well as his work, discussing his prolific role in the British theatrescape. This part of the thesis also gives an overview of the history of black theatre as a part of new writing in order to contextualize Williams' work.

The three chapters that constitute the body of the thesis are divided according to the themes explored in Williams' work and aim to give an overview of the playwright's movement from the margins into the mainstream. Therefore, Chapter one, *Where do We Belong? – The Jamaica Set*, analyses the plays *The No Boys Cricket Plays*, *Starstruck* and *The Gift*. With Jamaica in the background, it then discusses issues of identity, belonging and memory, as well as constructions of identity and family in first and second generations of immigrants of West Indians in Britain. Chapter two, *Constructions of Britishness: Where do We Fit in?*, examines the plays *Lift Off* and *Clubland*, discussing black male identity and the emulation of black teenagers by white teenagers and the issues that teenagers face nowadays in terms of identity, violence, and gang violence. Chapter Three, *The State of The Nation*, broaches issues that concern the state of the British nation, such as violence and racism in the construction of national identity and analyses the plays *Fallout* and *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads*.

The choice of plays for this Masters thesis aimed at a more general understanding of Roy Williams' work. Thus, the selected plays were analysed critically, focusing on the main issues that overlap in the plays and that form a set in terms of the broached themes. As the main aim of this thesis is to illustrate and discuss the author's trajectory as a playwright, the grouping of the plays was a personal choice with all the problems and exclusions that this carries, as it is the case of dismissing plays that are significant but are secondary to the theme of the dissertation. Therefore, this analysis is not meant to be an exhaustive one, rather a personal perspective that does not exhaust other perspectives on the plays.

In terms of methodology, the discussion of the themes broached in the plays is based on a thorough reading of the selected plays and on the critical exploration of the play texts. Although there are comments on performances, the analysis is essentially textual. Therefore, excerpts of the dialogues are in the body of the thesis in order to either illustrate a point of view or explore thematic areas within the text itself.

## Chapter One: Where do we Belong? – The Jamaica Set

*I shut my eyes for a minute, when I opened them, I  
found myself standing right in the middle of Lambert  
Street.*

Roy Williams, *The No Boys Cricket Club*

When reading Roy Williams' plays, it is important to acknowledge that there are three plays that form a sub-set: *The No Boys Cricket Club* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 1996), *Starstruck* (Tricycle Theatre, London, 1998) and *The Gift* (Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, 2000; Tricycle Theatre, London, 2000).

This trilogy, Roy William's early plays, (Barry & Boles: 2006; 298) "draw on Roy Williams's own family history to examine the situation of blacks in Jamaica, and subsequently in Britain, and their struggle to choose in choosing between their island heritage and the potential financial opportunities in England".

The trilogy explores common themes – identity, memory, self-awareness and a sense of belonging – and is set in Jamaica, forming a cycle. The plays came out due to the author's wish to explore the *lost generation, i. e.*, the children of the emigrants that were born in the United Kingdom, and the (Williams: 2004) "long-term disruption of emigration, the pain of separation".

*The No Boys Cricket Club* is based on Roy Williams' mother's experiences living in Jamaica and later in England, while *Starstruck* is about a family that never left Jamaica although some characters long to leave for the United Kingdom. Finally, *The Gift* focuses on the troubles that the children of those who had come to the United Kingdom faced. It explores the type of parents those people would become and their own generational conflicts with their children.

### *The No Boys Cricket Club (1996)*

*The No Boys Cricket Club* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 1996) tells the story of two middle-aged West Indian women, Abi and Masie, that live in London. Their lives are full of disappointment and unfulfilled dreams and it is due to their disillusionment that they return to their past, when their lives were full of excitement and dreams about their future. For them, it was the time when they were teenagers and were members of the No Boys Cricket Club.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The No boys Cricket Club is a cricket club founded by Masie and Abi when they were children in Kingston, Jamaica. No boys were allowed to play in this team.

The play is first set in present-day London with Abi, a fifty-three-year-old Jamaican woman living in East London, trying to hold together a dysfunctional family. She is a widow to a man she never loved. Her son, Michael, 26, is a drug dealer and is now living with her after abandoning his wife and his young son, while her daughter, Danielle, 19, is getting into trouble with gangs, influenced, according to Abi, by Faye, 21, the next-door neighbour and a single mother.

Abigail receives a letter from Masie, her best friend from the times they lived in Kingston, Jamaica, and were part of the No Boys Cricket Club, informing her that she will be staying with her for some time and telling her the news of her only son Jeffrey's death in a riot against some white youth. Later in the play, Ferdy, Masie's husband, visits Masie and she blames him for their son's death. Ferdy, however, believes that Jeffrey made the right choice, declaring that the streets are a war zone between white and black and that the boys have to fight this war. At this point, Masie and Ferdy begin a very heated discussion, started by Ferdy (Williams: 2002; 48):

He has a name you know, our son. // I know. // Then use it! We had a son named Jeffrey. You still blame me don't you? // You could've stopped him, he would have listened to you. // Them white boys were nothing but trash. // You should have stopped him. // Why, I'm proud of what he did! // Proud? Proud he's dead? He should have gone to the police. // What century you living in woman? It's our war, we fight it ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

During Masie's visit, Abi's life get worse and she literally escapes into her past, led by her best friend Masie. It is in these journeys that we learn about Abi's past. She was brought up by Miss Tyler after her mother's death and the departure of her father. She intimately believed that she was responsible for her mother's death – she died, due to a heart condition, after a quarrel with Abi because she had caught her (Williams: 2002; 39) “sneaking” off school with Masie. We also learn that Abi was a member of The No Boys Cricket Club and was highly talented, but that she gave up cricket to please her father and Miss Tyler and to fulfil the dream of becoming a nurse. Adult Abi then meets Young Abi and the adult character tries to convince Young Abi not to abandon The No Boys Cricket Club, because, sometimes (Williams: 2002; 37) “plans don't work out” and that she should continue to do what she loved most – being part of The No Boys Cricket Club.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The // is used in transcripts of dialogues from the plays in discussion throughout the Masters thesis and it symbolises the change of a character speaking and will be used in this Masters thesis henceforth. I chose to use this symbol instead of the name of the character speaking so that the excerpt would not lose fluidity in the reading.

<sup>16</sup> The meeting between Young Abi and Adult Abi is not a realistic scene. The use of ghost figures from the past in this play represents the nostalgia that the characters from the present feel. By meeting with their selves from the past, the characters from the

With these journeys between the past and the present, the two worlds are juxtaposed and the young and the much older characters meet on stage, creating an imaginary world of fantasy and illusion. The world of the past shows a game of cricket, which is a metaphor for the accomplishment of dreams, strength and self-rediscovery. Moreover, it is in this world that Young Abi is also the teacher and helps Adult Abi to face the reality of her own life and rediscover the feelings that led her life when she was a teenager. At the end of this confrontation, the audience is presented with a more confident Abi. Now she has more hope and is more able to stand up for herself. However, despite the change in Abi, her daughter raises doubts about the lasting effects of this change: (Williams: 2002; 71) “You’ll give up, she claims, You always do”.

### *Starstruck* (1998)

*Starstruck* (Tricycle Theatre, London, 1998) is set in Kingston Town, Jamaica, in the 1970’s. In this play, we follow the life of Hope, a thirty-eight-year-old woman, and the members of her family. In her early youth, she had dreamed of going to England, falling in love and living happily ever after. Instead, she was left on her own in Kingston and pregnant with Neville’s baby.<sup>17</sup> She married Gravel, the brother of her father’s son, a very simple man, who took responsibility for the baby and provided for Hope and the baby. Together, they had a daughter, Little Hope, 12. Hope has an affair with her nephew, Wally, 22, while her husband is ill. Gravel knows about his wife’s affairs and the fact that she can never love him as she loved his brother. It is this understanding that leads Gravel to live in suffering. Both Hope and Gravel are dissatisfied and unhappy with their lives as neither is living the lives they wanted and had dreamed of, as shown below when Gravel starts the accusations (Williams: 2002; 135):

Yer own nephew, my sister’s child. You is dirty nasty woman. Don’y tell me I nuh see my broder in twenty years right, nuh tell me dat. Ca’ yu still wan’ ‘im. // I married you. I love yu. // But yu still wan’ ‘im. You wan’ ‘im Hope. Tell me say yu wan’ ‘im, tell me you say yu want him Hope... (...)// Awright I wan’ ‘im” I wan’ ‘im to mek love like he used to do on de beach,

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present come to terms with the situations that they live and learn to live with their frustrations. Ultimately, the ghost figures from the past are the bridges the characters build to cope with the present.

<sup>17</sup> Neville is Gravel’s brother, who departed for England, leaving Hope pregnant back in Kingston. After leaving Jamaica he never contacted Hope or their son, Dennis. Neville was the love of Hope’s life and, in the present, due to her frustrations, Hope has an idealized image of him, as the only man that could love her as she dreams to be loved and the only man that could take her away from the life of frustration that she lives married to Gravel, in Kingston.

I wan' to fell 'im hands strokin' my thigh, I wanna feel my hands touchin'  
'im chest, 'im face, I wan' feel love dat mek me live a whole lifetime's-  
-worth in one night! Yu happy now, is dat wat you wan' fer me to say to  
yu?

These statements from Hope are quite strong, especially from a woman in the 1970s. It is very clear the frustration Hope lives in and, ultimately, the rebellion she keeps inside because she is unable to live her sexuality to the fullest. This speech, that can be shocking for the 1970's, shows how women felt the obligation, and were compelled by society to stay in a marriage that made them unhappy. Ultimately, this public recognition of sexuality she dreamed of living make Hope something of a feminist voice of that time.

Therefore, Hope lives her hopes and dreams through her son Dennis, who wants to be a film star. He thinks he can achieve his dream, especially when he gets a big part in the Stewart Granger film that is being filmed in Kingston. He also dreams of going to London, to RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). Meanwhile, he earns his living with his cousin Wally by deceiving people who arrive in town from the country. However, his girlfriend, Pammy, the daughter of a prostitute, wants him to settle down, get a job and marry her in Kingston. Pammy gets pregnant and Dennis is faced with a dilemma: stay in Kingston and assume his responsibilities or go to England to follow his dream. Gravel wants Dennis to face up to his responsibilities and Hope urges him to follow his dream. It is in this in-between that Dennis discovers that Gravel is not his real father and Hope falls from her pedestal on which he has placed her.

Through Dennis and Pammy, life repeats itself and the future is in Dennis's hands. Will he break the cycle and follow his dreams or will he stay and repeat his parents' story? The audience knows that it was almost impossible for a black man to become a film star in England in the 1970s, except the case of Sidney Poitier and the audience knows that if he decides to stay he will live a frustrated life.

After Gravel's death, Dennis decides to stay on the island, face his duties and continue Gravel's dream of owning a taxi company. In this way, he rejects his mother. At the end of the play, Dennis recites a line of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), which shows that he has abandoned his dream but he has not forgotten it completely.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> (Williams: 2002; 159) "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!"

## *The Gift (2000)*

*The Gift* (Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, 2000; Tricycle Theatre, London, 2000) is set in Clarendon, Jamaica. In the first scene, the two main characters, Bernice and Heather, are fifteen years old. In the rest of the play, they are in their late forties.

In the first scene, Bernice tells Heather that they are daughters to the same father, when the two teenagers say goodbye because Heather is leaving for England to join her parents. It is possible to understand the pain of separation of the two sisters when one gets to leave Jamaica and the other is left behind on the island.

In the second scene, we see Heather, with little to show for her years in England, returning to the island to bury her son after a riot with a group of white teenagers. Hereafter, Heather describes what she felt when she arrived in London, the cultural shock, the reunion with a father she no longer recognized and knew (Williams: 2004; 49):

He weren't the same daddy. Soon after we stepped off the plane, we're walking through the terminal. I'm holding Mama's hand, she look so good, so thin, she was beautiful. Then we see this rough-looking man walking towards us, I ask 'Who is dat?' Mama say 'Das yer daddy.' 'Nuh' I say, 'dat not mi daddy, ware 'im gold tooth, ware 'im smile. Min uh want dat. Mi want mi daddy.' (...) I wanted to die.

She fought her way up to become a doctor and encouraged her children to do the same. However, her son Andrew ran away and was killed in a street fight by a white youth. Later, we discover that Andrew was the one who started the fight and the white boy only defended himself. On the other hand, Janet, her daughter, has left school and is trying to run a restaurant with her boyfriend, whom Heather does not approve of. Heather had educated her children to do well in life so that they would not depend on whites and could occupy respected positions in society. But her children chose to follow their own wishes and desires instead. Through these characters and their different positions it is possible to see that the two generations have different expectations. The older generation expects professional and social achievement, whereas the younger generation only expects to find their own place in society. In short, whereas the first generation have collective expectations, the concerns of the second and third generations are more individual.

At the same time, the audience is presented with Bernice's story and the feelings of inferiority she had had when she was left behind in Jamaica. She kept living in the house that belonged to her father but she has no real right to it as she lives there on Heather's charity. Bernice used to be able



to talk to the dead but she has lost the gift; however, she never reveals that she lost the capacity to communicate with spirits and continues to trick people who give her money so that they can talk with their dead relatives (Williams: 2004; 50):

Mi had a whole heap of spirits come visit mi, yessir. Ca' dem got unfinished business in this world like Mama used to say, ca' dem loved ones want chat to dem. I is providing a service, Bernice Stuart, spiritualist advisor. Yu like de sound a' dat Daddy? No, course yu don't. Yu don't. A whole heap of spirits want talk to mi Daddy, but not yu, nossir! But yu have to help mi now Daddy, ca' dem spirits gone, long time deh nuh talk. And I wan' fer dem to talk, oderwise mi got no life.

Clarkey is Bernice's constant companion and always tries to mend Bernice's mistakes. He wants to marry her but Bernice procrastinates about the situation.

There is also the sub-plot of Andrew's ghost haunting them, which shows the presence of the supernatural in the play. Despite Heather's pleas to Bernice to contact her dead son and her attempts to do that, strangely enough, Andrew's ghost only communicates with Janet. Bernice says that her niece also has the gift of talking to the dead. The audience never sees Andrew's ghost or hears his voice. The ghost's presence on stage is acknowledged by members of the audience through the conversations that Janet keeps with a 'presence' that is not visible to the spectator and to Heather feeling a wind on her face at the end of the play.

### **Common features of the plays**

The plays mentioned here deal with contemporary issues and the characters speak of the here and now of life in the United Kingdom from the perspective of a generation for whom the United Kingdom is not 'home'. In fact, the plays are mirrors of the nation as (Sierz: 2011; 1) "most playwrights not only reflect and refract the reality around them; they sometimes anticipate and second guess the future". The plays have 'national identity' as their central theme which is part of the widespread conversation about who the people in the United Kingdom are as a nation. Theatre is a means of conveying notions of what is 'national' and what is 'alien' and it is through the way the playwrights write and rewrite these notions that the English have of themselves that they create new conceptions of Englishness for the present and future. In the words of Sierz, (Sierz: 2011, 1) "British theatre made its own contribution to the continuing argument by offering highly individual and distinctive visions of Englishness and Britishness". In the plays that compose the

Jamaica set, Williams looks to the past to explain contemporary Britain. As such, it is Jamaica that represents the cultural imaginary for many characters rather than the United Kingdom.

The plays discuss themes that lead the audience to reflect upon themselves or, in some cases, lead the audience to recognize themselves either in the characters or in the situations they live through. In the Jamaica set plays, people from the black community are the most likely members in the audience as Dierdre Osborne argues (Osborne: 2006b; 86):

Black writers write for black actors [...] staging issues of race, ethnicity, and colour as an explicit accompaniment to the thematic content of their work. [...] Not only are there culturally specific references in the form of names, behaviour, spirituality humour, gesture, use of patois, food, staging of the domestic environment and shared understandings of social expectations but also inhabiting a space in a surrounding society in which both writers and their black characters are cast as a minority is registered, critiqued and displayed.

It is through the gathering of the characteristics mentioned above that it is possible to say that there might indeed be a 'black' way of writing. On one hand, black writers generally share a writing style whose main characteristic is being critical of both established society and the black subcultures within it. However, each writer has their own individuality in searching into the theme of black British identity. In the analysis of this issue, with the presentation of black characters experiencing situations experienced by black people for black audience, the dramatists use, as has already been mentioned, cultural manifestations of the black community, such as music, dance, cultural manifestations and language, among other aspects.

As far as language is concerned, the Caribbean form of English called patois is often used in black theatre plays. With the first generation of African Caribbean migrants, different varieties of Caribbean Creoles, including French-related Creoles, were introduced in Britain. Contrary to expectations, despite early linguistic assimilation and integration policies, these Creoles have survived. Jamaican Creole in particular, colloquially referred to as 'Creole' or 'Patois,' has become the dominant Creole spoken within the British African Caribbean community, since about 60 per cent of African Caribbean migrants were Jamaican. Over the years Jamaican Creole, influenced by local forms of English, has changed and a distinct British Jamaican Creole, with minor regional differences, has emerged. The continued use of Creole in Britain has to be seen against the background of racism and discrimination in British society. For the second and third generation of African Caribbean, Creole, in particular Jamaican Creole, has become a symbol of a common black

identity forged by a shared experience of racial discrimination. This common identity provides African Caribbean of different Caribbean origins and backgrounds with a common ground for political and cultural struggle against racism and for equality. Creole is also used as a form of establishing a particular identity, whose language is its main form to represent the cultural values of the West Indian in Britain. As language transmits common values, attitudes, beliefs and views of the world, it is an important part of identity, and a person's linguistic choice thus reflects an important part of their identity. Therefore, Jamaican-based Creole has become a significant symbol of black identity and resistance to assimilation, particularly for the younger generation of British African Caribbean.

In the particular case of the plays that form the Jamaica set, it is important to discuss themes that are transversal to all the plays, such as identity, constructing the self, a sense of belonging, memory and family.

### **Identity and Constructing the Self**

In these plays, the theme of identity is represented by the main female characters, who have come to a point in their lives when all they have achieved is questioned by others and by themselves. The plays have specific cultural references in the most various forms – language<sup>19</sup>, behaviour<sup>20</sup>, social understanding, among others. There is the legacy of immigration and diasporic cultural forms that deeply influence contemporary black British writing and thus the form in which characters present their feelings and their attitudes towards Jamaica and Britain. In fact, in these plays by Roy Williams, Jamaica is regarded with nostalgia whereas Britain represents the frustration of the unfulfilled expectations. The diaspora now includes the different generations of indigenous black Britons and the plays in the Jamaica set show the different perspectives that the different female characters have on Britishness.

In *The No Boys Cricket Club*, when Abi was a teenager, she dreamed of going to England and becoming a successful nurse. In this particular case, Britain was seen as the place of social and economic achievement. She believed that anything would be possible in England and that her dreams would come true. Moreover, Britain also encouraged many of these people from the colonies to migrate as workers in the reconstruction of the United Kingdom after the Second World War. However, many years later, we discover a woman that does not feel that she belongs to the

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<sup>19</sup> In all plays that form the Jamaica set there are characters that do use patois in a more evident way than the other characters as their form of language, as it is the case of Gravel and Hope in *Starstruck* and Bernice and Clarkey in *The Gift*.

<sup>20</sup> The two main female characters, Abi and Masie, in *The No Boys Cricket Club*, play cricket in Kingston, a source of pride and collectivity. When they arrive in the United Kingdom they stop playing this sport because it becomes a sign of racist oppression.

place where she lives. She has not found what she was looking for and keeps travelling in time to Jamaica to rediscover herself and her identity. In fact, in a state of rootlessness, Abi searches for the time and the place where her roots are. Abi's story tells that the Promised Land, England, ended up as a disappointment because she could never fit in and she did not find the happiness she thought would be waiting for her in England. Somehow, for Abi, England ended up being a poisoned gift as it killed all her dreams to a point that she was forced, in her mind, to travel to her past and to Jamaica, where her roots were. Subsequently, in a sense, Abi only has an identity in the past. In this play, the adult character had to visit her own past so that she could remember who she really was, what her dreams were. In this journey, Abi rebuilt herself and her identity. Despite the other characters not recognizing or believing in those changes, Abi was herself again, with the same dreams and the same confidence towards her future.

With the juxtaposition of the two worlds, Roy Williams creates a very interesting and personal theatrical moment. The character was able to travel to her past and understand what her present had become, what was left behind, what could be restored. That journey created the possibility for her to change as she remembered whom she had been, what her dreams were and what she wanted to do with her life. These journeys into the past are only possible because Abi is a character with a split identity. This split identity was built into the process of Abi's growth into adulthood and the political processes of displacement and racism. By being separated from all the people and the things she knew and loved, the process of creating a stable and strong personality was broken. Consequently, two parts of her personality were created alongside each other: one that remained in Kingston and the other that continued in Britain. However, Abi shows that it is not possible to maintain this coexistence of two personalities because none will be able to exist fully. This explains Abi's need to travel into the past so that her present personality gets stronger. The personality of the present needs the personality of the past so that, together, they can be stronger and Abi is able to be happier. Going back to the past is a fantasy resolution which may not enable the possibility of solving this dilemma in reality in the present because, as it was referred, the character only has an identity in the past, thus making the identity in the present a shadow due to the nostalgia that she feels, not enabling her to create an identity in the present.

Not only is Abi struggling to survive, but also her children have trouble being part of a community and fitting in. This is especially true of Danni, who always gets involved in street fights and gang fights because the other girls talk about her mother disrespectfully. On the one hand, Danni pushes her mother away. She thinks that she is a lunatic who prefers to avoid reality, choosing to ignore the fact that Michael is a drug dealer. She urges her mother to take a stand, to change things and assume a position regarding Michael's behaviour. On the other hand, she fights whoever disrespects her mother. She tries to protect Abi from what people talk about their

family in the street. It is in this difficult mother – daughter relationship that we understand that the issue of racism underlies Danni’s behaviour. Despite being born in England, she has to, literally, fight for her position and her family’s in society. She has to fight for acceptance and respect. This suggests that notions of black female identity are different from generation to generation. For the first generation women, the fight was about professional and social achievement whereas for the second generation, the fight is for a different kind of respect in their own society. In fact, Danni does not feel the same way as her mother towards Jamaica. For Danni, (Osborne: 2006b; 87) “identity has derived from country of origin, cultural antecedents and its relationship to British-ness is apparent and forms a resistance to the implicit oppression and marginalisation” because, as any second generation of immigrants, she perceives Britain as her home, feeling as British as any member of the white community.

As Gabrielle Griffin suggests in her historicising of late twentieth century British Black and Asian women’s drama (Griffin: 2003; 25),

Whereas during the 1980s plays were dominated by inter-generational conflicts as expressive of the difference between the adult subject who migrated and the child who, so to speak was migrated, and their different accommodations to that situation, by the 1990s plays tended to focus much more on how to live in Britain now, beyond the experience of the moment of migration, as part of a generation that had grown up in the UK.

Danni reflects this shift in the way she fights Abi for the nostalgia her mother feels towards Jamaica and in the way she incites Abi to forget the past and take the fate of her life in her own hands, being firm in her decisions. On the other hand, her gang fights show that she is fighting for her place in society among the members of other communities that are also second generation in Britain.

The conflicts referred to in the statement above are not exclusive to women and to female playwrights. Black male dramatists such as Roy Williams also portray these issues in their plays because they also experienced similar feelings and situations. The problems raised by migration in the adult that migrated and the child that was migrated and her problems with how to live in Britain now are common to all black people regardless of gender. Yet gender plays an important part in how they are experienced, because they face issues that are proper to each gender. For instance, men will face the issue of what it means to be black in Britain with all the preconceived ideas inherent to their identity; whereas women will also face issues regarding their awakening sexuality and unplanned pregnancy.

Therefore, both Abigail and Danni have different perspectives on identity, the first rooted in Jamaica and the later rooted in the fight for a place in Britain, the country she perceives as home, and those perspectives shape them in different ways, because both are caught between two cultures. However, the different perspectives are not independent and do not exist within themselves. The identities and their construction of the women in the play, especially of the women of the second or third generation, are based on the identity of the first generation. The identity of the generations born in the United Kingdom are based on the culture of origin of their parents, which shaped their behaviour, in some cases, their way of thinking and reflecting and, more importantly, their place in British society. The weight of not being white and descending from immigrants dictate their position in society as well as their access to culture, education, health, jobs, just to name some, which then determines their life. In fact, the place of the second and third generations is usually one of marginalization and oppression, as is the case with Danni, who frequently gets involved in gang fights. However, Danni's behaviour does not mean that she is more marginalized than her mother; it simply means that she fights for her place in society differently.

Similarly to what has been exposed on the relationship between Abigail and Danni, Heather and her children show a similar generational conflict in *The Gift*. They all have different experiences of Britain, as Heather is an immigrant but her children are not. Her children, especially Janet, fight their mother in order to have the experience they believe is best for them, according to their dreams and their wishes. However, throughout the play, there is the evident (Starck: 2006; 232) "concern with the quest for an identity by ethnic minority women". This happens for both women of the older generation and their children, who are members of black communities of the second and third generations. Griffin explains this phenomenon, (Griffin: 2003; 8) "indeed, many of their<sup>21</sup> plays [...] focus on issues of race, colour and ethnicity as key determinants of their characters' experiences. This is almost inevitable given the political climate in Britain in which questions of difference, migration, ethnicity, and regulation are perennially high on the agenda". In a sense, marginalization forces black playwrights to reflect on identity in a way white playwrights often do not have to. The two plays show the tension and even the estrangement between the first and second generations, caused by the anglicising of the latter. This illustrates (Starck: 2006; 236) "pressing issues for young black women in Britain", which for second and third generation young women are different from their mothers.

In *Starstruck*, Hope encourages Dennis to take part in the film that is being shot on the island. Day after day, Hope follows the shooting with binoculars, which is as if she were a part of

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<sup>21</sup> This refers to plays written by women but it is no lesser true for the plays that compose the Jamaica set, which focus issues about women.

it through Dennis. She is not in the film but her son is and she can follow every movement of the actors and crew. In Hope's and Dennis' minds, the part in the film gives Dennis the possibility to have a career in acting and leave the island (Williams: 2002; 144, 145):

I go to Englan' Pops. (...) I showed Granger my speech from Romeo an' Juliet, he say I should audition for dat school RADA. I go soon. (...) I could be the first Jamaican ever to win Oscar. De first!

It is important to note that Dennis chose the play *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) by Shakespeare, one of the most romantic stage plays of all times. The love portrayed in the sixteenth century play contrasts with Dennis own love relation with Pammy, a relationship that Dennis is not very sure he wants to keep as his intentions are leaving Kingston to pursue his dreams of becoming an actor. In fact, the ending of the two plays could not be more different: whereas Romeo and Juliet die for love, being unable to live without the other, Dennis and Pammy stay together but at the loss of Dennis' dreams, who leads his life henceforth in the frustration of being unable to follow his wishes of becoming an actor in Britain.

Dennis shows his wish to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, which illustrates the idealized vision he has of England and the course of his life. This vision is the mirror and the echo of Hope's vision, as it was she who influenced Dennis to leave the island and battle for social and economic success in England.

In the play, Hope is a character whose life is full of a responsibility that she cannot bear. Therefore, she tries to escape from her dull husband and her dull life by maintaining a relationship with her nephew and by dreaming of film stars. However, it is possible to establish a relationship of sympathy with her because the audience understands that she lives a life she had never wished for. It is her way to cope with a life of dissatisfaction and misery, a life she embraced to be up to the responsibility of raising a child. In fact, we see a character that lacks identity, *i. e.*, Hope is not able to find a balance between the life she gets and the life of which she dreams. She does not know who she is, whether the woman with responsibilities towards her family, or the woman that keeps intact her youthful dreams. Thus, she keeps relating to the other characters divided between reason and her heart and Hope's completeness is constructed only through fantasy.

In *The Gift*, the issue of identity is discussed through the reasons for the death of Andrew and the reaction of Heather to her son's death. Andrew died in a riot, killed by Nicholls, a white youth, in self-defence. In this play, we are presented with the consequences of a multicultural Britain that leads to racism and the subsequent ethnic hatreds, where all types of incidents happen in the streets. Williams does not discuss responsibility for the murder but the reaction of the mother who

is an immigrant in England and her expectations in getting justice for her son. When she sees that the murderer of her son is not convicted, she returns to Jamaica to bury him. She feels that the country where she has lived in for thirty-two years has not given her what she deserved and has failed her because her son was black and the crime's perpetrator was white. All she wanted was to be treated equally and see the justice that the white Britons get in this type of crimes motivated by racial issues (Williams: 2004; 32, 33):

They're all bastards, Clarkey, they're all sons of bitches. Thirty-two years of my life man, thirty-two years, paying into their system. All I wanted back was justice, not lies, just justice. (...) As soon as I heard the verdict, all I wanted was to get out of there, get my boy out of there. He was too good for that country anyway.

The disillusionment and the frustration that Heather felt during all her life of struggle in Britain were crucial in the creation of her identity. These feelings transformed her in an outraged, somewhat bitter woman, which deeply influenced her relationship with her children. These feelings also made her change her attitude towards Britain, which became the symbol of all her losses, and, ultimately, towards Jamaica, which became the symbol of belonging and positive feelings. This feeling that Heather has towards English society and English justice can be compared to that felt by many members of the black community in England regarding the Stephen Lawrence case.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to the ending in the Stephen Lawrence case, however, Heather did not find the justice that she needed for her son's murder. In fact, witnessing the absence of justice is Heather's own personal tragedy. As a teenager, she went to Britain to join her parents and came across a completely different culture. There she had to fight her way so that she would have a respected position in life and in society. Hence, she (Williams: 2004, xii) "tries to bully her children into

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Lawrence was a black British teenager who was murdered in a racist attack while waiting for a bus on the evening of 22 April 1993. Witnesses alleged he was attacked by a gang of white youths chanting racist slogans. After the initial investigation, five suspects were arrested but not convicted and it was suggested, during the course of that investigation, that the murder was racially motivated and that Lawrence was killed because he was black. It was also suggested that the handling of the case by the police and Crown Prosecution Service was affected by issues of race. A public inquiry was held in 1998, headed by Sir William Macpherson, that examined the original Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) investigation and concluded that the force was 'institutionally racist'. The charge of institutional racism in particular prompted a series of changes within the Metropolitan police. The inquiry also recommended that the double jeopardy rule should be abrogated in murder cases to allow for a retrial upon new and compelling evidence. This became law in 2005. In 2010, the case was described as being one of the highest-profile unsolved racially-motivated murders.



doing the same”. She knew about the difficulties she had to face, being from a different culture and being the daughter of immigrants from the West Indies. (Williams: 2004; xii, xiii) “Heather has driven her kids to do well. She does not want them to have a cap in their hands, waiting for the dominant white culture to save them”. Once again, it is possible to verify the generational-clash and the different perspectives on Britishness and social identity, which have been discussed before. In fact, it is the sense of displacement and the racism she felt that constructed Heather as a character.

To conclude, the fragmentation of the identities of the women in the plays is the result of their experiences of displacement and the nostalgia towards a past and the fact that they left the place where they were born to leave for Britain. Thus diaspora plays an important role in the formation of the fragmentation of identities. The female characters in the plays in Jamaica set, mainly Heather and Abi, are divided between what they are in Britain and their idea of what they would become there and what they were in Jamaica and their wish to return to the past and meet themselves and what they were in the place where they were born. On the other hand, Hope is divided between the woman that remained in Kingston and the woman she dreamed of becoming in Britain. The place where these characters chose to live, allied to racism, plays an important role in the shaping of their identity. They are not happy in either place, dreaming of the place where they are not. Therefore, a sense of belonging and identity are intimately connected and the characters, through their experiences, sense that they belong somewhere other than the place they are, which contributes to their fragmented identity.

Fantasy is of the utmost importance in the creation of identity because these female characters are unable to cope with the reality of displacement and racism. Therefore, they resort to fantasy to get the strength they need to live in the present with all the problems it has. However, the use of fantasy to build identity may lead to a false sense of security and strength which can contribute to a temporary sense of complete identity. These characters’ identity may collapse at the sight of any grievance they may not be able to cope with and that glimpse of structured identity will disappear. To sum up, these identities are instable and may not be able to handle the difficulties of life, especially in the handling of the issues that are inherent to the fact of being immigrants in the United Kingdom.

### **A Sense of Belonging and Memory**

The plays of the Jamaica trilogy deal with the theme of the past, the generation of those who came to Britain and their sense of failed dreams, thus constructing a sense of belonging through memories of the past. Those people who arrived in Britain in the sixties and the seventies had a

unique experience and they helped to change the British landscape in racial terms by building their lives and their families in Britain. When those immigrants arrived in Britain they were foreigners and they had to deal with all the obstacles and the difficulties that an immigrant has to face, such as the different culture, the access to education, health, jobs and housing. And it is their stories that happened forty or thirty years ago that help to explain the Britain of the present. As Indhu Rubasingham points out, (Rubasingham: 2002; xix) “these plays deal with the Dick Whittington myth – the lesson that the streets are not always paved with gold”. It is through those first immigrants that Roy Williams explores (Rubasingham: 2002, xix) “the ambivalence of the society that his generation has inherited, the so-called multicultural one”.

It is also with the first generation women of the plays, Abigail and Masie (*The No Boys Cricket Club*) and Heather (*The Gift*), that Roy Williams explores the issue of migration and a sense of belonging. According to Griffin (2003), this is a matter of diaspora, the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland, or people settled far from their ancestral homelands, which can cause displacement and estrangement. Whereas displacement is an effect of dislocation associated with the forced removal of a person from the place where she belongs, (Griffin, 2003; 36) “estrangement is an effect of that displacement and relates to the violation of one’s sense of belonging which may be experienced by those who are displaced”. This concept of diaspora entails the recognition that the space is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants, but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In fact, diaspora is a permanent condition for first generation immigrants and their descendants because they have to maintain a permanent negotiation between their culture of origin and the society they migrated into.

Thus, Roy Williams based himself in the stories of his own family to explore this issue. In *The No Boys Cricket Club*, Abi, who went to Britain as a teenager to find her pot of gold but encountered disillusionment and a lack of place, represents that first generation that in the 1960’s went to Britain in search of a better life but incurred a psychological cost which haunts them in their maturity. This cost is so heavy for Abi that she literally travels in time to return to Jamaica, the only place where she felt safe and felt her roots as woman. Therefore, it is through her own memory of who she was as a teenager and as a member of The No Boys Cricket Club that Abi is able to find a way to rebuild herself as a confident, self-assured woman in the present. Here, sport plays a very important role because, when Abi ‘remembers’ how she felt when she played, she feels that she belonged to something. So, cricket (Osborne: 2011; 490) “is used as one lens by which to evaluate degrees of belonging in contemporary urban culture”. However the metaphor displayed by cricket is quite different. In Jamaica, cricket was a source of pride and collectivity whereas in Britain it becomes a sign of racist oppression. According to Dierdre Osborne, Norman

Tebbit established the connection between cricket and white Britishness when he asked which team the immigrants cheered for, the team from where they came from, or the one from where they are, by coining his “cricket test”. Through this test, Norman Tebbit challenged the loyalty of the ethnic minorities and the way they described their ethnicity. Tebbit suggested that being British was not a matter of the way immigrants saw themselves as British but the way they reacted when cheering the national cricket team. Lord Tebbit, in April 1990, suggested that immigrants and their children could not show loyalty to Britain until they supported the England team at cricket, neglecting the team from their country of origin.

Roy Williams subverts the assumptions of both whiteness and maleness through Abigail and Masie and the way the two women, being immigrants in Britain, harked back to the cricket team from Kingston. Through these characters’ attitudes, the author (Osborne: 2011; 490) “represents a particularly uncompromising vision of diasporic (dis)inheritance in a London working-class community beset by domestic violence, neighbourhood fracas, male profligacy and drug dealing – a marked contrast to 1950’s Kingston”, in which cricket becomes the central metaphor for the difference between the two locations.

In *The Gift*, through the characters Heather and Bernice, in a family completely torn apart by distance, Roy Williams explores the feelings of the children who had to come to Britain to join their parents and those who were left behind.

At the end of the play, she decides to stay in Jamaica because she would only return to England to seek for justice for her son, as she tells Clarkey. The following dialogue is started by Clarkey (Williams: 2004; 33):

Is why yu nuh stay? Dis yer home gal. // [...] Dis ware yu belong. // I could go back. // Go back fer wat? // Get justice for Andrew. I don’t want to feel I let him down.

Heather has no sense of belonging to Britain and, finally, decides to stay in Jamaica and, for the first time, in a long time, in the final scene, she laughs, allowing her original homeland help her cure her pain.

In this play, it is important to notice the humiliation that Bernice feels when she understands that she has been left behind and has been excluded by her own father. This leads to the conclusion that both migrants and those who remain in one space are affected and effected by migration. Therefore, people are equally shaped by diaspora but not necessarily in the same way. The characters in *The Gift* suffered transformations and were affected by immigration. Heather never felt herself to be truly British even though she tried very hard to be accepted and to succeed. The fact that

she was West Indian made her feel like an outsider in Britain and made her feel that she was uprooted from the place where she felt comfortable and shaped her identity. It was her experience of having been uprooted that led her to push her children to strive to be part of a country, be accepted by the British and have the feeling that their identity and the respect they deserved was in the place where they were born. Heather's only aim was that her children would never feel the sense of unbelonging and drift that she had felt when she came to Britain and had spent all her life attempting to overcome. On the other hand, Bernice was shaped by diaspora because, even though she never left her homeland, she was affected by the consequences of emigration. She also felt the sense of unbelonging not because she was rooted but because she felt abandoned by the people she loved the most. This sense of abandonment formed her character and her self as an adult woman. Her lie about being able to contact the dead was her own way to establish a connection and to have a feeling of being part of something and endure her sense of belonging to something that would never let her down. However, even this gift ended and she was abandoned by the spirits as well. In fact, this ability of talking to the dead that Bernice had, and later Janet with her dead brother, that gives title to the stage play, the gift of communicating with the dead.

In contrast with crime-ridden, impoverished contemporary Kingston, Williams shows that the memory the characters have of the Kingston of their youth, of their nostalgic homeland, is their primary space of belonging. The feeling of nostalgia that is intimately related to the sense of belonging to home, in this case Jamaica, leads to the feeling of displacement in the place where the characters migrated to. It is so because it is the place where they were happy and they felt secure. In no other place did they feel the same way. In Britain they never sensed that same happiness and that same security because they always felt themselves to be immigrants and non-British. It is a nostalgic reconstruction of a Kingston they only knew as children. Therefore, if they ever return to present-day Kingston, they will not recognise it because it is in fact different, that sense of belonging is not the same because it is the memory of a place they belonged to, not to its current reality. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that they, currently, do not belong anywhere.

To sum up, all the characters mentioned show that the reality in Britain was not what they expected and they had to struggle to survive, to make something out of themselves. In the end, it is their memory of the lives they led in Jamaica that makes them return because Jamaica is where they belong and where they feel their roots are.

## Family

The Jamaica set tells stories about members of a family and the way those people relate and it is through them that Roy Williams broaches, in a subtle way, some issues that are quite sensitive, such as teenage pregnancy and domestic violence.

In the Jamaica set, teenage pregnancy is an important theme but it is worked through in different ways in the different plays. In the first play, *Faye*, is a twenty-one-year-old woman who has a small baby that she cannot stand and whom she considers a burden. It is clear throughout the play that she does not wish to be a mother and that the baby keeps her from living the way she wanted to. On the other hand, in *Starstruck*, Pammy gets pregnant and that pregnancy is the reason why Dennis decides to stop chasing after his dream of going to Britain to assume his responsibilities. In this particular play, the issue of pregnancy is raised to lead the audience to reflect on the importance of an unplanned baby, the obstacle it can be in the pursuit of dreams and goals. Finally, in *The Gift*, Janet, a sixteen-year-old, has a baby. The girl seems happy with it but her mother, Heather, does not understand her daughter's decision. Janet gives up school to marry her boyfriend and keep the baby and she runs a small restaurant. Heather believes that Janet threw away her life, yet Janet is completely happy with her choices and has the firm conviction that she is entitled to her own decisions apart from her mother's wishes and expectations. It is possible to compare Heather's reaction to Hope in *Starstruck* because both mothers believe that their children, with a baby coming, will have their lives ruined. It is interesting to note that the same thing happened to Hope in her youth and, in her mind, that pregnancy ruined her life as it kept her on the island and made her enter a loveless marriage and a dissatisfied life.

Roy Williams, through the cases of pregnancy in these three plays, intends to lead the audience to reflect on an important social issue in today's Britain: teenage pregnancy. In recent years, this has become a concern for British society and the British Government and it is a particular concern in the black community because of fathers abandoning their children and the fact that statistics show that "rates of teenage motherhood are significantly higher among mothers of 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean', 'Other Black' and 'Black Caribbean' ethnicity".<sup>23</sup>

According to government policy and key statistics on teenage pregnancy in the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom has the highest teenage birth and abortion rates in Western Europe. The rates of teenage births are five times those in the Netherlands, are double those in France and are more than twice those in Germany. Due to the rates and the statistics, and following a report from the Social Exclusion Unit in 1998, the Teenage Pregnancy Unit was set up, implementing a

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<sup>23</sup> Digital Education Resource Archive (DERA) (2006), "Teenage Pregnancy: Accelerating the Strategy to 2010" [online]. Available at [dera.ioe.ac.uk](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk). Last accessed: 27 May 2012

ten-year action and strategy. This unit aimed to halve the under-18 conception rate by 2010 (from 46.6 per 1 000 in 1998) and to lower the rate of conceptions by under-16s. Despite not being able to obtain these initial goals, by 2008, the teenage conception rate fell by 13.3 per cent in under-18s and by 11.7 per cent in under 16s.<sup>24</sup>

In what the statistics about black families in particular are concerned, data indicates that “girls and young women of Black and Black British ethnicity are also over-represented among abortions under 18. In 2004, Black ethnic groups (which represent around 3% of all females aged 15-17) accounted for 9% of all abortions under 18, and in London, which has high rates of repeat abortion, 43% of all under 18 abortions following a previous pregnancy were for young women from Black ethnic groups”.<sup>25</sup>

Roy Williams leads the audience to reflect on the causes and the consequences of getting pregnant during adolescence. Not discussing the blessing that a baby may be for a person, the author chose to show instead the immediate consequences of teenage pregnancy so that the discussion could be broadened, and the audience could seriously consider this issue. However, it is important to note that the scenario that Williams presents on this issue differs from the behaviour of female characters in the play, who seem quite happy with their babies. This happens because the author intended to give the perspective of an adult on the matter that generally is different from the perspective of the teenage mother, who probably has difficulty in having a wider perspective of what it means to be a mother at such a young age. By portraying reality, the dramatist intends to present a kind of documentary drama, not judging the issue, rather stating that this is what is happening in the world around audience members.

Another family theme broached in *The No Boys Cricket Club* is domestic violence. In Act Two, Scene Two, Michael swings his arm and accidentally hits Abi, apologizing immediately. In the play it appears as an accident; however, the possibility of a young man hitting his mother is there explicitly. In an interview given by the author to Aleks Sierz, Roy Williams says that this particular moment in the play raised a very nervous reaction within the audience (Sierz: 2000; 116):

It’s scripted as accidental, but that was still too much for the Stratford East audience, which is very lively. They’re not shy about shouting out. Well, that scene touched a nerve. On the press night, during that scene, someone

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<sup>24</sup> The Family Planning Association (2010). “Teenage Pregnancy” [online]. Available at <http://www.fpa.org.uk>. Last accessed: 28 January 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2006), “Teenage Pregnancy Next Steps: Guidance for Local Authorities and Primary Care Trusts on Effective Delivery of Local Strategies” [online]. Available at [www.education.gov.uk](http://www.education.gov.uk). Last accessed 28 May 2012.

shouted out, ‘Stab him with your knitting needle!’ A lot of people said no black guy would ever treat his mother like that.

The reactions to this event in the play are very interesting on several levels. The reaction of the spectator is not traditional audience behaviour in mainstream audience, which shows that, if black theatre is reaching out to new audiences, the members of those audiences are also responding and reacting in different ways to the drama presented on stage. On the other hand, it is important to notice that one moment of physical reaction gains more attention than whole scenes of verbal and psychological violence.

Roy Williams did not intend to say that all black men hit their mothers but that this does happen with both black and white families. The important element here is to realize that people have to maintain awareness that it does happen and do something about it. Therefore, people saying that a black man would never hit his mother is just a phase of denial as well as a defensive reaction as there is the sense that the black community did not want this to be another argument to be used against them. Domestic violence would be another weapon to use among the many others that are used against them. Society has first to admit the existence of domestic violence between the different members of a family so that the possibility of doing something about it may be created. However, the play, by portraying the reality, shows the reality but it does not suggest how things could be done differently. It is up to the audience to reflect upon the realism portrayed on stage and then, on their own, act and take measures towards the solution to this issue.

Nevertheless, in this play, the case of Abi and Michael is not the only case of domestic violence. Faye is also a victim of domestic violence, inflicted by Reece, her husband. Danni tries to help Faye and advises her to leave him. Yet, Faye is not sure about her future actions because she does not accept her mother’s suggestion to move back in with her. Danni and Faye maintain a dialogue on Faye’s abuse and the characters address the issue directly, openly and bluntly, as the following dialogue started by Faye (Williams: 2004, 11):

Last time he does that to me. // You’ve said that before. // I’ve never thrown out his records before. // He’ll slap you around again. // (...)// Thass right, he ain’t gonna hit me no more. // As soon as you’ve sobered up, he’ll grab it off yam. // Well what else can I do, Miss Know-all? // Leave him.

These two different cases of domestic abuse are the key for a more thorough reflection on a problem that has always existed independently of social evolution and the increase of knowledge. Following the actions of the countless organizations that fight against this familiar and social

dysfunction, Roy Williams alerts the audience to consider this issue so that it does not continue. The audience's reaction to these moments in this play shows that people become very upset and disturbed when they are faced with violence. However, all people are aware that domestic violence does exist and that is a very relevant social issue. What they are not used to is seeing it on stage. The proximity between actors and audience makes the situation a more personal one. This explains the nervous reaction from the people in the audience when the actor playing Michael hits his mother. It is by creating bonds with the characters and the situations represented on stage that members of audience can be more sensitized to this issue. The situations shown in a play can become more personal through the establishment of personal connections rather than government campaigns that may not be as effective as a play because they frequently are regarded as impersonal. Moreover, Stratford East is quite an intimate theatre due to the small number of seats, which provides the connection between the actors and the audience.

In these plays, the audience is thus a key factor in the creation of meaning. Sierz (2011) argues that the meaning of a play lies in the experience of the audience. Different audiences have different reactions towards the theatre plays that are presented. A predominantly black audience has a different reaction to that of a predominantly white audience; a younger audience might feel differently to an older one; white different to black, Asian different to white. Different audience members experience the same plays in different ways and it is possible to observe, in some cases, different reactions to the same play, according to the audience members.

(Osborne: 2006b; 84) Black drama exposes mainstream (predominantly white) theatre-goers to aspects of black British cultural input that is as indigenous to contemporary British cultural identity as that provided by white playwrights. It provides Black audiences with authentically rendered cultural representations which have not as yet been able to develop a flourishing continuum in Britain's cultural psyche.

White audience are not continuously exposed to black British drama which leads to the continuous presence of preconceived ideas about black people in Britain's cultural psyche. Few are the cases of black British playwrights presenting their work in mainstream theatres as well as theatres that accept alternative black theatre work and, in some cases, white audiences are reticent about the themes presented in black plays.

Therefore, the meaning of the three plays that form the Jamaican set would be different, depending on the audience members. A predominantly West Indian audience is more likely to establish a bond to the plays rather than a white or Asian audience, but it does not invalidate the



case that audiences other than black can also create bonds to what is presented on stage. The West Indian audience members are more likely to recognize themselves in the issues broached, according to their own experiences or through the experiences of someone they know; they will be able to see their problems and their questions reflected in the characters and in their stories. Therefore, many people from the black community end up seeing the productions of black companies because they reflect their experiences, or the experiences of people they know.

As an example, there is the case of the audience reaction to the way the *The No Boys Cricket Club* was staged. In order to stage the juxtaposed worlds of London and Jamaica, the designer, Rosa Maggiora, created two scenarios that changed according to the setting in the play, which caused a great impact on the audience.

(Rubasingham: 2002; xvi) [...] you could hear gasps from the audience when the stage changed for the first time from contemporary, grey London to the magical beach in Jamaica. As one audience member told the designer, ‘Thank you, you took me back home!’

The plays in Jamaica set show a world that is immediately recognizable not only to the black audience, who create bonds of recognition, but also to any other audience because the themes that are broached in the plays are not exclusive to the black community. However, for the black community there would be extra layers of meaning not available to white audiences. Williams explores themes that are social concerns for all races and all social classes, but from the perspective of the black community.

## Chapter Two: Constructions of Britishness – Where do we Fit in?

*No! I don't wanna be like him, i don't wanna be like  
any of them right. And yu can't make me.*

**Roy Williams, *Lift Off***

After the plays about Jamaica, Roy Williams turned his attention to the reality that surrounded him, dealing with the issues of the present rather than those of the past. As he recognizes (Osborne: 2011; 489):

My body of work is in two halves: the early plays were very reflective and personal where characters reflected on the past; my later plays were more objective, commenting on what's going on now.

The present issues concern the experiences of second and third generation immigrants, the children of first generation immigrants. Initially encouraged to go to England as part of the post-war reconstruction and economic expansion, the presence of these migrants began to question what being British meant, as Gabriele Griffin (2003; 8) suggests:

Their arrival into Britain shattered the presumed dichotomy between Britain and its colonial 'others', creating the beginning of a transformation of what 'being British' means, a shift encoded, inter alia, in the various successive immigration and race relations acts designed to regulate the collapse between 'margins' and 'centre' as a consequence of migration.

The collapse between margins and centre may not be very visible in the first generation of immigrants because these people tended to remain within their own communities, being, on one hand, marginalized by the dominant white society and, on the other, retaining their own marginalization because they did not feel part of the culture and the society that received them. However, this situation was not maintained by the later generations of immigrants because, as they were born in Britain, they had a different experience of the need to socialize and blend in at all social levels. Therefore, the second and the third generations of immigrants did not feel themselves to be marginal because they were part of British society more permanently. Their presence in Britain influenced British society in the same way as they were influenced by the people to whom

they related. People are highly influenced by the cultures they live in, independently of their origins. A black person can be influenced by an Asian person or a white British person and vice-versa. They cross cultural and identity barriers and influence each other and the idea of margin and centre blend. However, the asymmetries of power on the basis of race are not removed so easily.

In this line, the work of Williams focuses on the issues of identity and what being British means in the plays posterior to those that compose the Jamaica set. However, he is still specifically concerned with black British experience even if he includes white characters in his plays.

### *Lift Off (1999)*

The play *Lift Off* (1999), which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, on 19 February 1999, was inspired by London teenagers, as Williams explains (Williams: 2002; xii):

Now, before the likes of Ali G came along, I used to see white kids all around Ladbrooke Grove, talking and acting like black kids. They were not being rude or offensive, they were absolutely genuine, reacting and responding to the world they were living in.

From this observation of the environment around him in Notting Hill, Roy Williams created the two main characters in the play: Mal and Tone, black and white friends respectively.

*Lift Off* traces the friendship between these two young men in West London. Mal is a ‘cool’ young black man and all the girls desire him. Tone desperately wants to be like him. Therefore, he speaks ‘black’ and dresses ‘black’, emulating his black friend. Hannah, Tone’s girlfriend, constantly urges Tone to separate from Mal on the basis of their different ethnic identities, and Tone seems to have created an identity in the image of his friend, so that he is not a sustainable character when apart from Mal.

The play is set in the past, when Mal and Tone were eleven-year-old teenagers starting secondary school, and in the present, when the same characters are in their early twenties. In Act I, we see Mal and Tone meeting Rich, a young black teenager, in the playground. Rich is a lonely boy, who makes paper planes and does not act ‘black enough’, according to Mal, who thinks that being black is having attitude and being ‘hard’. Therefore, he tries to shape Rich to the image he thinks a black boy should have. According to Mal, black identity is constructed through behaviour and an attitude towards life and the other. Therefore, a black teenager must act aggressively, verbally or physically, as well as being daring with the opposite sex. Any attitude contrary to this is considered contrary to the stereotyped and generalised assumption of what a black man should be and do. This concept of being black is not exclusive to Mal in the play, because Tone’s attitude

is presented as an emulation of Mal, which shows that Mal's arguments are somehow generalised, not only to the black community but also to white people. In fact, (Rubasingham: 2002; xxii) "the play shows how little space there is in urban London to genuinely define and explore your identity without coming up against the constraints of racial stereotypes". However, Rich can't ever live up to the image Mal defends and ends up committing suicide. This event haunts Mal throughout his life. The triangle of friends illustrate that the meaning of 'blackness' shifts from the positive to the negative and from friend to friend.

Mal betrays his friendship with Tone's underage sister, Carol, who becomes pregnant. Mal seems not to care, and worse, is defamatory about her. Tone is outraged and calls him a (Williams: 2002; 232) "black bastard...nigger" in the heat of a confrontation. On his side, Mal is also angry with the world because he has leukaemia and there aren't enough black people donating bone marrow for him to have the hope of a cure. This finale for Mal is very ironic, considering that, during all his life, he fought to fit into his conception of what it means to be a black person and to feel part of the black community. However, this is hardly the fault of the black community, but a problem of unequal access to health care. As such, the boundaries of white and black continue to define the friendship between the two men.

This play shows that the issue of race is an important one, even among close friends. Tone, despite his wishes and efforts to be black, only has one perspective. It is not that Tone wants to be a member of the black community, what he seeks is a certain media-inspired glamour that is attached to being black. At the end of the play, Mal raises these issues, asking Tone to stop following him, to stop trying to be like him. Tone, for a moment, looks at Mal leaving and follows him. The dialogue begins with Tone (Williams: 2002; 239, 240):

Wass so funny? Wat if I saved yer life, yu won't be laughin' then. // It ain't gonna happen dough. // How d'yu know? Ca' yu ain't black. Yu don't know nothin man. // Dumb white Tone, thass me ennit? / Wat, yu gonna grovel now? // [...] Go on take a punch. I won't do nuttin. I'll juss stand and let yer. Call me a nigger. // No. // It's wat I am. // Yer not. // A cocky coon who got his dues. // Yer mad. // [...] Hate me Tone. Wass the matter wid yu? // Don't follow me no more.

This play discusses what it means to be 'black' and the implications inherent to this construction, such as machismo, language, strength, verbal and physical aggressiveness, and sexual potency. It also looks at the meaning of friendship and identity in a racially-divided urban setting. As Osborne (2011; 491) points out:

Typical Williams motifs converge in this play: urban inter-racial relationships between young people, racism and its effects upon them; the fluidity of possible cultural affinities relational to socio-racial identities; young people's traumatizing by peers; adult inadequacy to sustain emotionally, support or encourage youth into maturity, and the intense compensatory (but insufficient) bonds they form with each other.

The ethnicity of the characters is never specified explicitly except with Rich who is detailed as (Williams: 2002; 163) "a young black schoolboy". However, the reader can infer the other characters' ethnic background throughout the play, (Osborne: 2011; 491) "opening to scrutiny just what informs these socio-cultural categories of blackness and whiteness". This scrutiny can lead to the questioning among spectators of preconceived ideas of what it means to be black or white nowadays. Ethnic background is 'performed' in the play through characteristics such as behaviour, language, psychological characteristics as well as through the arguments and points of view that they defend. Therefore, it is through Mal, Tone and Rich and the relationship they maintain that Roy Williams explores what it means to be black and issues related to black identity. Mal is the (Rubasingham: 2002; xx) "cool black guy on the estate" and Tone wishes to be like him, copying Mal's characteristics to make him the most popular boy in the neighbourhood. He talks and dresses 'black'. The authors Barry and Williams (2006; 299) note the phenomenon whereby "white boys, in particular, are starting to emulate their black peers, responding to a cultural formation wherein machismo, strength, and sexual potency are all being aligned to the signifier 'black'".

The emulation expressed above shows the desperation of Tone to be like Mal in order to cover his own absence of identity as a young white man. Here, identity definition is intimately connected to cultural stereotypes related to racialized masculine characteristics. Tone ventriloquizes black street talk and engages in cultural cross-dressing in order to reproduce Mal's hyper-sexualized version of black masculinity. Tone and Hannah, his girlfriend, have a conversation, where she accuses him of his lacking identity. Hannah begins the conversation (Williams: 2002; 209):

They ain't all that Tone, no matter what they say and think. Blacks Tone. That's ehat I'm talking about. // Yu a racist. // No. // [...] Yu best fuck off then. Go get yer cab, move. Co' if yu don't like Mal, yu don't like me right. // You're not black though. // I might as well be right. // Looked in the mirror lately? // Don't chat like yu know me. // You really want to like Mal? 'Don't fuck wid a bwai and him chicken.' There must be something seriously missing in your life if you think acting like them is going to fill it for you.

The emulation that Tone enacts and the need that Mal has to be seen as black raise several questions about the attitude of the white as well as the black teenagers. The first issue is related with the reasons why white teenagers emulate black teenagers, better still, why do white teenagers wish to be like the black teenagers? White teenagers emulate members of the black community because they are deeply influenced by black culture in music, films, theatre and literature. This emulation provides white teenagers with the possibility to live on the margins and defy social standards, made easier by the fact that in poorer urban communities, white and black experience are increasingly similar. However, white teenagers can move between cultures and, at the same time, not necessarily have doubts about their own identities because the privileges inherent to the white community continue to exist. Even emulating members of the black community, white teenagers will continue to be members of the white community and will never suffer the prejudice attached to being a member of the black community. Emulation thus becomes a comfortable position to occupy. However, for black teenagers, these choices of whether to be white or black do not exist in the same way because the racism of skin colour will always condition their ability to make such transfers.

The play continues to lead the audience to question the issue of identity through the character Rich and the way Mal decides to transform him into a 'blacker' person as he starts secondary school. They meet in the playground and, according to Mal, Rich does not act 'black' enough because he is not 'cool' and is not 'hard'. Mal forces this idea of blackness onto Rich who refuses to follow the stereotype (Williams: 2002; 192):

Rich! // No, I don't wanna be like him, I don't wanna be like any of them right. And yu can't make me. // Shut up. Why yu love to take things seriously? Yer so heavy. All I want to do is show that yer hard for fuck's sake. // Why? // It's the only way to be man. Show yer temper a bit more, prove yer hard. Yu hear wat I said?

This concept of being black imposed by Mal is a set of hardened attitudes of defence against racism and prejudice. Prejudice and the actions it provoked had a long-term impact on discriminatory treatment of West Indians in Britain. It is through the attitudes defended by Mal that the members of the black community establish their position and defend themselves from racist and prejudiced behaviour. However, Rich can't live up to be Mal's preconceived ideas of a hard, 'tough', bad-tempered man, rejects the generalized category of violence attributed to black men, and ends up committing suicide because he could not conform to this stereotype. While Tone strives to pass as a young black man, Rich desires to maintain his own identity apart from the

stereotype of what it means to be a black. Rich is not able to show the machismo and the verbal and physical aggressiveness that is usually related to the preconceived idea of being a black man and that he has seen in his father. As Rich was a victim of abuse through his father, he wished to be the opposite of him. In Rich's case, through the experience of being a victim of the stereotype, the male role model transformed itself into an example of what *not* to grow into. Rich's suicide haunts Mal because he only chose Tone because he considered him 'blacker' than Rich. It is quite ironic that it is a white teenager acts more like a black young man than the young black man himself. As such, the establishing of identity in contemporary Britain (Barry & Boles: 2006; 302) "has detached itself from skin/colour and became a set of attitudes connected to physical strength and pugnacity".

Through the triangle of friends, it is possible to conclude that the concept of being black is not a matter of skin colour or pigmentation but a performative set of attitudes. This explains Mal's attitude in abandoning Rich, a friend that he thought did not reunite all the characteristics that would minimise his *unease about his own 'blackness'* and identity. By choosing Tone, Mal reinforces his own idea of 'blackness' thus continuing to build the stereotype emulated by Tone and reinforcing an identity associated with physical and verbal strength and pugnaciousness.

Black identity is also identified with a certain attitude to sexual behaviour, as if sex can establish position among peers, as is shown in Mal's observation to Tone (Williams: 2002; 196,197):

Wat do yu want me to say Tone? Yer dick is the same as mine. // Yeah, go on then. [...] // Wat do yu expect me to say? 'Breden, check out Tone's piece, shame us all!' I was jealous. So, how's it feel? // Awright. // Wear tighter jeans, show it off more, get nuff pussy. Wat? // Did yu fuck Linsey? [...] // Ferget her, she was a lousy fuck anyway. You got a third leg man, be happy. // Yu have got a bigger dick. Nuff gals fancy yu. Even my little sister's up for it now.

Mal's desire to be seen as sufficiently black leads him to sleep with Tone's younger sister, Carol, and then deny paternity when she gets pregnant. He also abuses an employee and the customers in a fast food restaurant due to his frustration at having been rejected by a white female in a club. In fact, Mal only sees women in terms of their sexual availability, as he tries to explain the reason that led him to sleep with his best friend's sister: (Williams: 2002; 231) "When pussy's on offer yu tek it! Fuck wat matters thass it!?". This remark shows that his concept of black identity is also informed by sexism. Mal cannot resist these stereotypes of male machismo so that he can feel part of those who he believes are the 'real' black men.

Making things harder for Mal to cope with his racial position, Mal is diagnosed with leukaemia but cannot find a donor within his own race. The illness may be considered an illustration that being black or white is not only a matter of style but has concrete effects in a racialized world. In a dialogue with Carol, Mal then shows his desire not be black, to not have to choose all the time to feel part of a group because, for him, being white is easier than being black, as shown in the following dialogue started by Tone (Williams: 2002; 218):

So wat do yu wan'? // I wanna be white. // White? // Yer so lucky. // Lucky?  
// Can't yu see that?

Mal's remark on wanting to be a white man reinforces the idea of the power as well as privileges and advantages associated with being white, including access to health treatment and to a donor's bank, which would have saved his life. As a black man, Mal has felt all his life the need to take actions and make choices in conformity with the stereotypes of his racial group. However, at the end of the play, Mal seems to recognize that all his machismo and sexual aggression are not a good model to follow, when he tells Tone (Williams: 2002; 240.) "Hate me!". Through this statement, Mal is saying that the model of a black man that he followed was ultimately counter-productive, although as Barry and Boles (2006; 303) remark, "where his own models should have come from remains an open question at the end of the play". This open ending shows that the playwright does not wish to provide answers, but rather lead the audience to reflect upon the questions raised throughout the play.

In order to show Mal's interior struggle with his own identity and the silent fight between all the male characters in the definition of their identity, the play was performed on a raised concrete stage (Barry & Boles: 2006; 301) "that resembled a boxing-ring, as several reviewers pointed out, providing a fitting space for the dissection of the aggression and competitiveness of the male community that Williams presents". Indhu Rubasingham, the director of the play, used the stage to illustrate the issues raised by the play and the interaction between those characters. Once again, the staging plays as a fundamental part in the creation of meaning. It is rather appropriate that the stage resembled a boxing-ring because the different characters do fight each other in the construction of their identity, and its preservation, as well as in the pressure they put on the others to fulfil the image of identity they have conceived for them.

In the play, there is an interesting triangle (Mal, Tone, Rich) which explores the ways in which both black and white have become detached from skin colour and coded as forms of behaviour which permit cross-racial affiliations. Yet it also explores the ways in which while it may be possible for white young men to 'pass' as black men, it is less possible for a black man



to ‘pass’ as a white man because of institutionalized racism. Therefore, the possibilities of cross-cultural affiliations are conditioned by the material practices of racism.

### *Clubland* (2001)

*Clubland* (Royal Court Theatre, London, 2001) follows the story of young men and their experiences of clubbing. We are introduced to Kenny and Ben and the people they come across in Palais nightclub.

Ben, the only white man in the group, is racist and unpleasant. He is married but despises and hates his wife. He has only married her under pressure and due to her money. Therefore, to escape from home, he goes out clubbing every night with Kenny. Kenny is a sweet young black man who wishes to have a steady relationship, unlike Ben, who only seeks sex. Kenny is constantly criticized by Ben for his non-existent sex life, deconstructing the view of the black man as the sexual predator and the white man as less promiscuous. Ben begins the following dialogue (Williams: 2004; 77):

So wat happened? // Didn't fancy it. I had a feeling she was a kid. // Shut up, man, I saw yer, yer tongue was on the floor dread, nuttin happened cosy u were boring the arse off her about yer job. Who gives a fuck about pensions? Yu think she wants to hear that? She was waiting for the jump, man.

Later in the play, Kenny begins a relationship with Sandra but it is not sustainable, as he seems unable to leave behind Ben's influence and his vision on relationships. Kenny is greatly influenced by Ben but secretly tries to relate to Nathan, an ex-member of the group who married the woman he loved, had a child and abandoned the life of clubbing. In fact, Nathan invites Kenny to be the godfather of his little daughter. Nevertheless, Kenny has difficulty accepting because of Ben's disapproval.

While this plot unfolds on stage, important questions are raised about this lifestyle. Roy Williams deals with the insecurities and frustrations of these young men and the importance sex has in their lives. The play raises many questions about what it means to be black in Britain and questions the effect of media-influenced stereotypes on the relationships of young black people.

The play joins several other plays that discuss the issues of being a man, black or white, in Britain, establishing a connection between Williams' work and in-yer-face drama's investigation of masculinity (Barry & Boles: 2006; 303, 304):

*Clubland* overlaps with the lad plays of the mid-1990s, which were written by Nick Grosso, Patrick Marber, Jez Butterworth, Simon Bent and others and presented male characters who, in a show of post-feminist misogyny live in a world wilfully blind to the progress in gender relations in the last twenty years. Ben's vitriol prompted Charles Spencer in his review to write that the male characters in *Clubland* possess 'attitudes that make Jimmy Porter seem like a passionate feminist'.

Like Mal in *Lift Off*, Kenny is questioning the decision he made at school, when he decided to side with his white friends and not protest when they attacked and racially insulted Ade, a young African immigrant that had just joined their class. A number of situations lead Kenny to reconsider his friendship with Ben, including his encounter with Ade in a club, Nathan's request that he be a godfather for his daughter, and Sandra's frustration with his sexual encounters with white women. Under the pressure of his friends, Kenny struggles with his identity as a black man. As Barry & Boles (2006; 304) argue:

Kenny struggles with his identity as a black man under the pressure he feels from Ben, Nathan, Ade and Sandra, all of whom want him to be or represent something different from what he currently is, ranging from a tough 'bwoi' (Ben) to a respectable family man (Nathan) to a strong-willed, self-confident sexually successfully black man (Ade). He must answer the question Williams tries to pose in all his drama: 'Where do I fit in?'

It is important to note that Kenny is pressured by his friends to make his choices. However, he navigates between the worlds that each of them represent and, as situations take place, he chooses individually, never ending relationships with any of his friends but keeping them in a position where they are not able to pressure him into choices he does not wish to make. It is by not succumbing to any of the pressures that he is able to keep all his friends and, at the same time, to construct his individual identity.

As in *Lift Off*, Kenny also deals with the issue of what it means to be black and the stereotypes that are inherent to this construction, such as a way of talking and dressing, behaviour, the people he should be surrounded by, or attitudes towards women and sex. Kenny struggles with the binary that is created by the parallel existence of the black and the white worlds. It is one world but it is divided due to the fact that different communities see it and behave as if it was made of incompatible parts. It is because he travels between these two worlds that he ends up belonging to neither of them at the beginning of the play.

However, Kenny starts making choices when he opts to be Nathan's daughter godfather, asks Sandra to marry him and opts to remain friends with Ben, despite Ade's accusation that he is

betraying his own racial identity and Nathan's attempts to keep him away from Ben's misogyny and aggressiveness. By the end of the play, there are not many revelations in Kenny's personality but, throughout the play, it is possible to see that it is in his negotiation with the other characters of the roles they provide for him that Kenny finds his own identity. Basically, Kenny tries to construct an identity of his own out of the separate pieces of his life, in what can be seen as a much more positive ending compared to *Lift Off*.

In the discussion of identity in this play, Ade becomes an important character, because his masculine and racial identity is challenged by Sandra, who questions his need to have sex with white women from the club. She even suggests that Ade's behaviour has its origins in his failure to overcome the white boys' choice of Kenny over him at school. According to Sandra, this behaviour is his way of enhancing his once diminished masculinity and pride. Ade inflicts his anger on women in the clubs and, at the same time, is the target of hate of the white men who see him with 'their' women.

Unlike Ade and Ben, a 'balanced' identity, in this play, is only achieved by Kenny, who seems able to navigate between the white and the black worlds. Kenny shows that it is possible to have an identity that is neither totally 'black' nor totally 'white' and feel comfortable with this. By not belonging to a specific community, Kenny is able to live in both the white and the black worlds, which enables him to build his own identity detached from the views of the other characters and their pressures. Kenny's position is important in relation to what happens with the characters in *Lift Off*, who cannot navigate between the worlds around them because they are not able to disconnect themselves from the stereotypes. Through Kenny, therefore, Williams illustrates that finding one's position in society is only possible through the construction of an individual identity and not through the following of stereotyped and racialized identities.

The end of the play shows the male characters' position towards themselves and the others around them. Ben is unable to challenge his status as a white male, despite a sort of redemption after his wife left him and after he lost his job. Ade seems unable to cope with the white faces around him. Kenny is the only one that identifies with aspects of both white and black cultures.

As Roy Williams points out: "all I'm saying for Kenny is love who you want but make sure you're with them because you want to be, not because you're trying to play up to some stupid stereotype that's been handed down to you".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sierz, Aleks "Playwright Roy Williams" (2009). [online]. Available at <http://www.theartsdesk.com>. Last accessed: 09 April 2012

## Chapter Three: The State of the Nation

*They do not want us here, Barry.*

Roy Williams, *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads*

As Roy Williams continues his career, he becomes more concerned with the issues and the events that take place around him in his own time, encouraging a development in his writing style towards a particular form of socially realistic drama. The critic Charles Spencer, for instance, indicated (Spencer *apud* Barry & Boles: 2006; 311) “the proximity of Williams’s work to a new kind of theatre, called ‘verbatim theatre’ or ‘docu-drama’, an art-form with a particular relationship to current events”.

Although Williams does not use material from real transcripts or interviews, the main characteristic of verbatim drama, the proximity between real life and drama has meant that his theatre has a particular social relevance. From *Fallout* (2003) onwards, he treats issues that concern both the white and the black community and that are indeed the focus of government policy as reported daily in all type of news media, such as the ‘Damilola Case’ broached in *Fallout* (2003) or football violence as presented in *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002).

The playwright balances the brutality and stylized violence of in-yer-face theatre, as seen in the murder of Kwane by a group of teenagers on stage in *Fallout* and the stabbing of Mark by a teenager at the end of the play in *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, with the social complexity and emotive power of documentary drama present in other Williams plays. However, Williams’ drama focuses more on drama than documentary because he does not simplify the topical issues with stereotyped characterizations or well-ordered dramatic resolutions.

By broaching current themes that concern all sectors of society, Williams’s later plays echo the shifts and changes in English society in such a way that they can be seen as contemporary examples of the ‘state of the nation’ play<sup>27</sup>, in other words a form of large-scale drama that (Sierz: 2011; 16) “has always been involved in the project of rewriting our ideas about national identity”. According to Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt (2011), the state of the nation play is a model of political theatre developed in the 1970’s in plays by authors such as David Edgar, Howard Brenton and David Hare. The plays by these authors shared some characteristics as they were (Reinelt & Hewitt: 2011; 11) “large-scale plays, with a panoramic range of public settings, employing epic time-spans and usually performed in large theatres, preferably theatres with a national profile”. The main aspects of the state of the nation plays in the 1970’s were the hostility towards domestic

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<sup>27</sup> Here I am using the term ‘State of the Nation’ used by Aleks Sierz about New Writing in “Rewriting the Nation – British Theatre Today” (2011)

and familial settings as well as the determination to set the plot in the present-day England, so that it would be possible to discuss the issues that had made England what it was. Furthermore, a state of the nation play (Reinelt & Hewitt: 2011; 13) “can be one that deals with the condition of the nation rather than, more narrowly, the relation of the nation to the formal institutional forms of its governance through the state”. It is by discussing the social problems of the nation that dramatists express their view of the state of the nation rather than merely examining governance issues.

In the past, the state-of-the-nation play had largely reflected the anxieties of white, middle-class writers. However, with the emergence of a new generation of black and Asian writers, that changed, as drama became clearly alert to the ethnic diversity of British pluralistic, multicultural diversity. With all the changes that have been taking place during the last few years of the new millennium, it is possible to widen notions of the state of the nation play to stage the new conjecture or interrogate the new uncertainty of the nation.

New writing deals with contemporary concerns and aims to convey the author’s perspective on the state of the nation. In the article “A Tyrant for all time”, where David Greig is critical of the tendencies of the new writing, he outlines the characteristics of this new typically English new genre:

This English realism, this “new writing” genre which has so thrived in subsidised spaces over the past 40 years, attempts, as one of our leading playwrights put it, to “show the nation to itself”. It seeks out and exposes issues for the public gaze. It voices “debates” rather like columnists in the broadsheets. Its practitioners are praised for their “ear” for dialogue as though they were tape recorders or archivists recording the funny way people talk in particular sections of society and editing it into a plausibly illustrative story. English realism prides itself on having no “style” or “aesthetic” that might get in the way of the truth. It works with a kind of shorthand naturalism which says, “this is basically the way I see it”. Distrustful of metaphor, it is a theatre founded on mimicry. In English realism, the real world is brought in to the theatre and plonked on the stage like a familiar old sofa.<sup>28</sup>

Aiming to bring to public debate the issues that characterize the nation in the present, Roy Williams, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, wrote two plays that began to move away from the worries and the pressures of young British teenagers and the theme of black cultural identity and broach the issues that are contemporary to him and were wider concerns of British

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<sup>28</sup> In Greig, David “A Tyrant for all time” (2003) [online] Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk>. Last accessed: 8 July 2012

society, whether white or black, young or old. His plays intended to portray British reality as he perceived it, not disguising that reality with theatre aesthetics. It is by presenting reality in this way that these plays are excellent examples of contemporary social realism.

### *Fallout (2003)*

Staged at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, London, 2003, *Fallout* was written as a response to the murder of ten-year-old Damilola Taylor in Peckham, South London, in 2000, which was an event of national importance.

On 27 November 2000, Taylor set off from Peckham Library at 4:51 p.m. to make his way home. On approaching the North Peckham Estate, he received a gash to his left thigh. Running to a stairwell, he collapsed and bled to near death in the space of approximately 30 minutes. He was still alive in an ambulance on his way to hospital.

Different forensic scientists have presented different versions of what could have given Taylor his fatal wounds. The theory accepted by the Metropolitan Police is that he was attacked and fell on a broken bottle, later bleeding to death. He died ten days before his eleventh birthday.

In 2002, four youths, including two sixteen year old brothers, went on trial for the murder of Damilola Taylor. The trial led to all four suspects being acquitted.

After new evidence and a second trial where the accusation was unable to charge the suspects for manslaughter, on 9 August 2006, Ricky Gavin Preddie and Danny Charles Preddie, after a thirty-three day retrial, were convicted of the manslaughter of Damilola Taylor.

This case was given a lot of attention by the media, as Roy Williams himself declared: (Sierz: 2000; 7) “I remember following the Damilola Taylor case because it was the first case in which the police were going to be really scrutinized, because they’d fucked up the Stephen Lawrence case [in 1993]”.

Once again, a racially-motivated assault shocked English society, especially the black community, who had seen a similar case left unsolved for years with the Stephen Lawrence case (See Appendix1). As an English citizen and member of the black community, Roy Williams was angry at this story, as he assumes (Sierz: 2000; 7):

And I remember the feeling of anger: I was angry at the police, I was angry at the girl<sup>29</sup> as well, although I understood her. And I was angry at the

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<sup>29</sup> The girl referred to by Williams was the witness that gave an incongruous deposition on the Damilola Case, which harmed the investigation.

boys killing him. And angry at whoever let those boys down. I was angry generally. And particularly any time I read in a paper: black youths do this, black youths do that. It's all headlines, no one's going deeper. So I was just trying to show where these kids are coming from, and to say that this concerns everyone because these are British kids, and that's what made me write the play.

The author raises an important issue concerning the approach to the Damilola case, the differences in the media and the dramatic approaches to the case. On the one hand, the media treated the case in a sensationalistic manner, in which true and false events concerning the case played an important role in the formation of public opinion as well as in the social contours that the case took on. It is important to note that the media influenced greatly the preconceived idea that all black teenagers are violent. On the other hand, the dramatic approach by Roy Williams aimed to present the case without sensationalism so that the audience would be able to make their own deductions as to what was presented on stage.

This statement also shows how concerned Williams is with the things that happen around him in British society. Therefore, through this declaration, the playwright shows that the play is his vision of the nation around the time of the case.

The original production of *Fallout* was directed by Ian Rickson and a wire-mesh baseball court fence separated the actors and the audience. This fence created a dispiriting sense of humans trapped in their own environments and unable to escape from them. This created a sense of rupture between the audience and the actors as if the murder committed by the youngsters was itself represented by the fence. The fence could symbolise the impossibility of the audience creating bonds with the characters, creating a sense of impotence for the audience where they appear unable to react. Many of the audience members were positioned above the playing area on four sides. As Osborne (2006b: 89) indicates, "although this might have served to replicate the surveillance camera to a certain extent, the proxemics distancing effect can also alienate the audience from that in which the drama aims to emotionally involve them". Despite the idea of surveillance created, the fence might lead the audience to look at the actions on stage as if they were not part of their world, which can interfere in the creation of recognition amongst the members of the audience. This alienation can lead to a distancing from the aim, which was to lead the audience to feel shock and surprise. Thus, its aim to show the state of a nation whose members kill children almost casually may not have been successful.

The technique with which the staging of the play was created can thus be understood in two antagonistic ways. On the one hand, the distancing may prevent the audience becoming too

emotionally involved with the characters, which will create the necessary distancing to lead people to create their critical views and critical reaction towards what has been presented on stage. On the other hand, this distancing may lead to the opposite behaviour in the spectators, as the distancing created may be such that the members of the audience may not feel that they should consider the issues presented on stage important enough for them to react. The reaction and the willingness to act on the issues presented on stage will depend only on the members of the audience.

*Fallout* starts with the murder on stage of a young black boy, who we later know is Kwame, by a gang of four young black men: Clinton, Dwayne, Emile and Perry. Kwame is a very hardworking boy, just four weeks away from getting into university. According to the other boys in the play, he is not 'black' enough. He keeps to himself and spends all his time studying in order to escape the neighbourhood. Emile is pushed to kick Kwame in the head by the gang's leader, Dwayne, who kills the boy. Thereafter, the different characters act in reaction to this murder in a play whose format is almost like a judicial inquiry.

The murder is investigated by Matt, a white man in his mid-thirties, and Joe, a black man of more or less the same age. These officers of the Metropolitan Police meet the boys for the first time in a fast food restaurant where the local boys usually go and where Emile's girlfriend, Shanice, works. Shanice is beautiful, desired by all the boys, and has been expelled from school after stealing a teacher's wallet. She has protected Ronnie, who also works in the fast food restaurant, since school. Ronnie, on the other hand, is despised by everyone and worships Shanice. However, the audience later discovers that some part of Shanice's behaviour is suggested by Ronnie. This is the case, for example, of the revenge on the school director. It is Ronnie that instigates Shanice to steal Miss Douglas' money and assault her. The two characters establish, at the same time, a relationship of protection and dependence that means that, sometimes, it is impossible to understand who is dependent on whom.

The setting of the fast food restaurant is very important because it is a point of cohesion in the play. All the characters meet here and all the main actions take place in this location.<sup>30</sup> The setting contributes to the constant tension in the play and thus in the audience, who keep expecting new revelations to take place there. Furthermore, the concentration of events in one location also enables the rhythm of the play to be quicker, which emphasizes the inevitability of the outcome.

Emile and Dwayne begin to have problems, especially because Dwayne becomes interested in Shanice, who wants Emile to stand up for her, so that she can feel valued and appreciated. Emile

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<sup>30</sup> Among others, some of the main actions that take place in the fast food restaurant are as follows: it is in the fast food restaurant that Kwame is last seen; the police officers establish the first meeting with the suspects of Kwame's murder; the social relations between the members of Dwayne's gang with the girls, the policemen and Manny; the building of Shanice and Ronnie's plan to give a deposition accusing Emile for Kwame's death.



threatens Dwayne with a knife and they all know that from that moment on Emile's life will be in danger, especially after Ronnie reveals that Dwayne is carrying a gun. Shanice feels guilty because she was the one who urged Emile to act as he did with Kwame. However, the audience knows that Kwame never showed any interest in Shanice other than that of friendship. Due to this situation, Shanice asks Emile to run away but he refuses, demonstrating his courage in facing the situation, when running away could present itself as an easier solution for him. Therefore, Shanice and Ronnie decide that Ronnie will go to the police and say that she has seen the street fight that killed Kwame. By giving her deposition, Ronnie will send Emile to prison, which would save him from Dwayne, who would receive the twenty thousand pound prize for turning in the guilty person for Kwame's death and run away with Shanice.

In her deposition, Ronnie tells the truth but is led in her statements by Joe, the policeman, especially about the details of what happened that night, to which Matt completely objects. Matt starts the following dialogue where he shows his complete disagreement with Joe's method in the leading of Ronnie's interrogation (Williams: 2008; 94, 95):

Tell me you didn't just do that. // Believe. // She had no idea what you were talking about. // That's not how I read it. // [...] She didn't see a thing. // She must have done. // [...] She saw it happen. We got him, what did I say? You don't like it, you should have spoken up, Sarge! // You had no right leading a witness like that, without consulting me.// [...] A black kid. You have to watch yourself. Got be Mr Politically Correct Man of the Year.

This turns out to prejudice Ronnie's testimony and the Inspector determines that the investigation does not have a case as the girl's statements are not strong enough. After this, Joe sees his position harmed and several issues about the Metropolitan Police are raised. He accuses the force of being institutionally racist as a justification for his own behaviour. As Osborne (2006b; 90) suggests:

Racism is implicitly the underlying impetus for the action of the plot and is cited as a justification for black people behaving badly yet, in presenting such a dichotomy between the slightly priggish but diffident Matt, a Met career man and the volatile resentful Joe, its post-Macpherson report 'poster boy' limited in his self-knowledge, Williams effectively adds to the marginalising and generalising of the very identities he seeks to display and celebrate.

The fact that he considers the police force a racist institution seems to justify Joe's behaviour. By acting violently, Joe is contrasted with Matt, a white policeman, who acts by the book. However, although officially non-racist, this does not mean that the police force does not still look differently at black officers. This is what Joe feels when all his co-workers only do what the rules let them do, not risking anything to find out the truth about Kwame's murder. Williams raises the interesting question of to what extent Joe's violent behaviour results from his compromised position in the police force and to what extent that violence is his own. At the end of the play, the audience knows who killed Kwame as well as their reasons. Yet, no justice is seen to be done because the case was poorly handled by the police. Everybody's lives simply continue. Emile and Ronnie go away with their families and Shanice and Dwayne begin a relationship.

The play begins with the murder and develops during the homicide investigation by Joe who confronts, on the one hand, his white colleague's hypocrisy and, on the other, the gang culture that prevails in the community in which he grew up. As Joe is confronted with these two realities, (Osborne: 2011; 499) "inter- and intra-cultural and racial differences converge in this scorching exploration of losing connections to one's cultural roots and the ever-diminishing chances of obtaining justice for a murdered African teenager". The racial and inter-cultural differences presented in the play challenge the optimism of several police and official enquiries and raise the issue of tokenism towards a black police officer in a mainly white police force.<sup>31</sup> The black police officers find themselves caught between the culture of the white police force and the culture of the black community. On the one hand, black police officers feel that they do not belong to the white institution because it remains racist despite the effort to be regarded otherwise. On the other hand, these same black men are not regarded as members of the black community because the community feels that they have abandoned their community to join a predominantly white force that is still ruled by mainly white conceptions of justice.

Therefore, Joe is a portrait of displacement and social marginalization, not only at work, where he experiences the prejudice inherent to his cultural background, but also in the place where he grew up, because he cannot understand or communicate with the local teenagers and have their respect. Here, Joe displays a tension that exists between him and his colleagues as he is unable to succeed as a black man at the police force and as a black man investigating a homicide perpetrated by black teenagers. Feeling imprisoned, Joe is reduced to slapping Emile, the teenage suspect, to force him to confess. The physical violence becomes, for Joe, the only resource to get a confession out of the suspect, which shows that the policeman and the criminal suspect alike use violence,

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<sup>31</sup> Tokenism is the policy or practice of making a perfunctory gesture toward the inclusion of members of minority groups. This token effort is usually intended to create a false appearance of inclusiveness and deflect accusations of discrimination.

although in different degrees, for different reasons and with different effects. Violence becomes the only possible resource for black people within or outside the police, reinforcing the social and the behavioural stereotype of violence and criminality associated with members with the black community, regardless of their role and position in society. Contrasting with Joe's explosiveness, the white character, Matt, behaves in an apparently soothing, logical and restrained way. Therefore, Joe becomes a 'victim' of (Osborne: 2006b; 89) "white duplicity which, in twenty-first century guise is the 'rule-book' of the institution". Although events at the end of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first led to profound changes in the structures and in the ethics code of the Metropolitan Police as an institution, the fact is that the police force is composed of human beings and those human beings have not evolved according to the ethos of the institution they work for, or maybe it is the institution that has not evolved sufficiently for human beings. Throughout the investigation, Joe is put in an impossible position, which leads him to behave in ways that can be perceived superficially as reinforcing racist stereotypes.

In the play, Joe and Kwame are used to point out that there is an alternative to the assaults, thefts, continuous dishonesty and abusiveness to which the black community has been so often linked. However, for other teenage black characters, (Osborne: 2006b; 90) "recreation and survival are merged into a base need for gratification through sex, drugs, alcohol and random vengeful violence as a means of establishing an identity". Apart from Joe and Kwame, the other characters all form a sense of collective identity that is related to some form of criminality. Kwei-Armah explains this phenomenon, indicating that violence was the means that members of the black community found to 'keep it real', *i. e.*, to distance themselves from the white community. To a certain extent, violence can be considered a characteristic that unites some of the members of the black community and that, at the same time, leads them to stand apart from the members of the white community.

Another important issue raised by the play is the racial tensions between Africans, such as Kwame, and those of Caribbean descent, as it is the case of Clinton, Dwayne, Emile and Perry. This tension is highlighted by Shanice, who declares (Williams: 2008; 36) "I didn't want no smelly-head African next to me". As Osborne (2006b; 90) comments, "here Williams indicates the racialising distinctions that occur within the same race based upon African and Caribbean derived 'black' identities". However, despite the presence of this issue, Williams does not go deeply into the matter and no character develops this theme in more detail. The issue is raised and the audience is aware that racial tensions between black people from different ethnicities do exist and are a cause of some gang fights in the street, but the tension is not developed further.

On the other hand, *Fallout* is about the lack of references that allow people, especially black teenagers, to move away from their situations. The play shows a group of youngsters that have

been failed by the system. This is visible in the relationship that Dwayne maintains with his father, Manny. The presence of Manny in the play leads the audience to reflect upon the importance of a strong role model and a steady family environment in the healthy development of children and teenagers. As Sierz (2011, 147) puts it, “as well as being about race, this is also a story about class, the underclass. With bad education and poor employment, these kidults drift into gangs in search of self- esteem”. Inequality is, in most cases, the factor that gives rise to youth criminality. Many people, in fact, would argue that the line that divides British society is not ethnicity but class. The intersections between race and class make poor black teenagers an underclass within an underclass. The differences in the access to education, health, justice and jobs are quite different for members of the black working class and members of the black middle class. It is those with less economic means that are portrayed in the play, those who have to survive on their own.

The emergence of growing black and Asian middle classes means it is no longer possible to argue that ethnic background equals disadvantage as the black middle class lead very different lives to the black working class. For some groups, it is not only class, nor only race, but the interaction between the two which leads to a much more complex and subtle picture. However, statistical data reveals new evidence about the impact of the recession on the joblessness gap faced by minority ethnic groups. The labour force survey does show the number of black and Asian people becoming unemployed is increasing at a faster rate than for white people. The gap between the employment rate of ethnic minorities and the overall employment rate peaked at 16% at the height of the boom in 2005 and fell to 12% at the start of 2009. But the latest figures show it has risen back up again to 14%. When that is set alongside the fact that black people are still six times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by the police and much more likely to end up in prison, then the case for further action on race equality appears as strong as it did in 2000, when the issue on racial equality was raised due to the Stephen Lawrence Case.

Therefore, in order to feel powerful and to have a sense of belonging to a community that gives them the chance to have an important role in a society, black teenagers join gangs. It is a way to assume a social position that these youngsters do not have in the rest of their lives. Gangs work as a social microcosm where positions of power and social relations are well established. Therefore, these teenagers know their place in this particular society. Sometimes, gangs work as a substitute for youngsters’ first social microcosm, the family. It is possible to observe this through the relationship that Dwayne establishes with his father, Manny. Dwayne never had a strong parental figure in his life, for his father is a drunk and his mother is absent. The young boy becomes the leader of a gang, establishing with its members the relations of respect, complicity and mutual help that are more often part of a family relationship.

In fact, Manny only appears when he is asking for money from his son and takes no responsibility for the consequences that his actions have upon Dwayne. The dialogues between them expose the boy's vulnerability in being associated with a self-gratifying and neglectful father. These dialogues also provide an indication of the extreme emotional and probable economic deprivation of Dwayne's whole life up to Kwame's murder, as it is the case of the following dialogue started by Manny (Williams: 2008; 91):

Yu shame me. // Yu want chat 'about shame? Shame is seein yu, in the off-licence tryin tu buy a can of beer wid only twenty pence in yer hand. Beggin dat Indian man to let yu have it. // So wat, yu gonna mess up yer life?

Manny confuses all his children, which intensifies Dwayne's hurt and subsequent hostility. Thrown to the criminal margins of society, even his own father does not confirm his identity, which can be observed in the excerpt that Dwayne initiates (Williams: 2008; 90, 91):

Who is Junior? Did I hear yu right? Who is Junior? // Bwoi? // Junior is yer son, who live up by Shepherd's Bush, my half-brudda, dass who Junior is. Junior live wid his two little sistas, Tasha and Caroline, yer daughters, my half-sistas! Remember dem? Nuh, it muss be Anton yu remember, yer son who live up by Dagenham way. Or is it Stuart, my little brudda, who live two minutes away from my yard, who I never see. Nuh, nuh, it muss be the latest one, Kenisha. Wass my name? // Bwoi? // Move yer hand away from me. Wass my name? Yer so drunk, yu don't even know which yout of yours yer chattin to. Wass my name? Say my name before I buss yer claart all over dis street. Say it.

Without the experience of receiving respect from his father or being able to respect him, Dwayne transposes his aggression onto the surrounding world, which culminates with Kwame's murder. As Mark Ravenhill argues, regarding his play *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), (Sierz: 2000; 130) "the people in the play are just trying to make sense of a world without religion or ideology. They're kids without parental guidance – they're out on their own having to discover a morality and a way as they go along".

However, the characters in *Fallout* are unable to discover a sense of morality of their own and what remains from the play is that the lack of parental guidance did have a major effect in the building of identity and sense of morality of these youngsters.

### *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads (2002)*

This play opened at The Loft, National Theatre, on 2 May 2002, as part of the National Theatre's *Transformation* season and was revived with a semi-promenade staging at the Cottesloe, in 2004. *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads* marks a turning point in Roy Williams' career as a playwright. On the one hand, it is the most ambitious play of the author as he goes from writing for a cast of five actors to a cast of fourteen actors, most of them playing the role of white characters. On the other hand, with this play, Williams reaches the mainstream theatres, although the Cottesloe is the National Theatre's smallest and most experimental theatre. Williams' move into the mainstream accompanies a change in his writing as he no longer writes exclusively about the issues that concern members of the black community and works on issues that regard all sectors of British society. Broaching topics already in the public domain moves Williams' plays closer to the mainstream audience, whose members will establish a connection with the characters on stage. In fact, this attempt to bring audience members closer to what was happening on stage was obtained in the 2004 version by director Paul Miller and designer Hayden Griffin by placing some tables in the pub setting onstage, where audience members could sit and be close to the discussions and chanting that took place during the ninety minutes of the play. Incidentally, this is also the same period of time that a football game takes to play.

The play was created from the personal experience of the author, when in a pub in Birmingham city centre to watch the England versus Germany World Cup qualifying game in 2000, which England won. At the same pub, there were some men cheering for England. However, their behaviour bothered Williams, despite his happiness at the game's result (Williams: 2004; ix, x):

They were chanting, singing, screaming every racist word they could think of for a German whenever a German player got the ball. [...] I was dead happy, but those fans did spoil it for me a little; what is it about a football match that brings out the worst in the English? However, I couldn't help but think that a bunch of fans watching a match in a pub, a closed space, would make a strong image on stage.

From this episode, Williams wrote *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* aiming to broach not only the theme of race but also the issue of nationalism and what it means to be British, as he explains in the *Foreword* to *Plays 2* (2004; x), "I very much wanted to write a bigger play, not just simply about race, but about British Nationalism: what does it mean to be British in the twenty-first century, who's more British now, the blacks or the whites?" During the play, the keynote is

complexity because Williams is more concerned with writing a play about the state of the nation, but from a perspective of a black man. Therefore, issues of race and prejudice are present, but, at the same time, the diversity of themes is broadened to those that concern members of other ethnic groups, mainly the white community.

*Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads* is set during a Germany – England football game in the European Championships, in the King George Public House, in south-west London. The pub belongs to Jimmy and his daughter Gina, who has a teenage son, Glen. At the time the game is about to start, Mike, a black man who has recently abandoned the army after fighting in Afghanistan, comes in looking for his younger brother, Barry, only to discover that their father has fallen ill. Meanwhile, men start arriving to watch the game and among them is Alan, a member of a fascist political party, and Lee, a policeman who was stabbed at a rave party by a black man he was trying to help. Discussions on race, racism, being British, being black and being white take place, during the play, between the different characters, as will be discussed later in this analysis. Basically, the play (Kasule: 2006; 232) “interrogates the dynamic relationship within the community while at the same time exposing the fissures in the British identity and class”.

At one point, Glen comes back into the pub badly beaten and accuses two black youngsters, Bad T and Duane, who also robbed his latest generation mobile phone and his expensive coat. The discussions amongst the characters that are watching the football match become more heated. Meanwhile, Duane enters to return the mobile phone, saying that he did not approve of Bad T’s actions. Duane is not well received and is slapped by Gina. Duane leaves and, after a while, his mother, Sharon, bursts in to avenge her son. She is arrested by Lee and two other policemen, who take her to the police station. After Sharon’s arrest, a crowd of black people gather in the street and demand justice. Jimmy, Glen’s grandfather and owner of the pub, accuses Glen of ‘being soft’ and being unable to stand up for himself against the black kids in the neighbourhood. The crowd outside becomes more restless and throw a rock at the pub’s window. Glen goes away, grabs a kitchen knife to go after Bad T. Mark sees the knife and Glen ends up stabbing him to death, leaving him on the floor. Glen runs away and Mark’s body is discovered by Lawrie, Lee’s brother who follows Alan’s fascist ideals. Lee arrests Lawrie because he believes that he killed Mark. Jimmy discovers the bloody knife and tells everyone his grandson was the murderer. The play ends with Glen yelling that he has done the right thing because Mark was *a black bastard* (Williams: 2004; 234) and Lee advising Barry not to lose himself. By advising Barry in this way, Lee is asking him not to let revenge and racial hatred take over his life, as happens with so many members of the black community.

As Osborne (2011; 496) puts it, Roy Williams, in this play, “dramatises a debate of narrow, white- centred nationalism versus the new claimants, indigenous black citizens, in relation to the

broader base of antipathy to Germany sustained since the Second World War". The game against Germany brings out old negative feelings in British supporters as if winning the football game was revenge for all the difficulties that British citizens as well as people from the colonies suffered due to the destruction of London in the bombings during the Second World War. However, the reaction towards the football game against Germany is perceived in different ways by the white characters and by the black characters. The reaction of the white characters is intimately related with the hatred generated by the events in the Second World War. On the other hand, the reactions of the black characters towards the game against Germany are profoundly rooted in the sense that they that football, as well as cheering the English team, is a characteristic of nationalism. In the sports world, a world where none of the problems of the 'real' world are supposed to exist, national and political feelings have an important role, especially in the reactions of the fans towards the other team. Football, along with cricket, is considered to be the British national sport and its fans are proud of being part of one of the most important and powerful teams in Europe. Every win means the supremacy and the power of Britain as a nation over other nations, which contributes to the general feeling that fans have on their identity as British. Football is a part of the construction of white British identity and what it means to be British.

Racial tensions and nationalist manifestations dominate the entire play. Examples range from comments about the referee of that day's pub football match, in a conversation between Gina and Lawrie, who starts the dialogue (Williams: 2004; 153):

They love stickin together them lot. // Let me guess, the ref was black? //  
As soot. Never seen anything so dark.

to fascist statements by Alan, here in a conversation with Gina (Williams: 2004; 188, 189):

If they want to practise their black culture and heritage, then they should  
be allowed to do it in their own part of the world. By all means. // So  
whites are superior to blacks? // Yes, if you like. [...] // What has the black  
man done in the world?

In the previous dialogue, the status of the football players that reach the premiere league is present. The racist ideas that are implicit here bring out the fact that some people regard black football players, and other sportsmen and women in general, and their achievements as the only productive thing black people can possibly do. Black athletes are often described in ways that attribute their athletic success to natural ability, whereas white athletes are described as intelligent



and hard-working. The perception that black players do not work and that athletics just comes naturally makes black athletes somehow seem less deserving of their success. Implicit in these types of descriptions of black athletes is that they did not have to exhibit the virtues of hard work and commitment that the white stars did. This also implies that white athletes have conceded the physical superiority of black performers because this fits the image that it is white sportspeople who have the brains. Paul Andersen (1996) argues that there are two explanations used to explain the supremacy of black athletes and for the number of black people practicing sports in the premiere league, the sociological and the genetic.<sup>32</sup> The sociological states “that blacks became superior athletes as a way to get out of the ghetto and the poverty and economic distress it may entail”.<sup>33</sup> In fact, sports, during teenage years, is regarded as a way to keep teenagers away from the ghetto and from gangs that can lead young black people into a life of crime. The genetic arguments, which claim that black people have genetic characteristics that allow them to do better in sports, after years of research, have proved to be groundless. It is, however, the genetic arguments that Alan uses to show his racist view of the black football players, claiming that they have done nothing for the world except to take advantage of all the things that white people have given them.

In addition to all the racist statements by Alan and Lawrie, there are a set of characters that protest at their notions and their inherent racism, but, at the same time, articulate their own prejudice. This is the case of Gina, who, throughout the play, manifests her disagreement on racist statements, yet shows her angry prejudiced behaviour when her son is attacked. In the following transcript Mark questions Gina’s moral values and her prejudice after her son was attacked by two black teenagers. Gina begins the dialogue (Williams: 2004; p. 307):

Leave him alone. I’m gonna kill the little cunt. // You mean black cunt? (to Barry) You getting this? // Come on, Mark, they were a couple of wrong uns you saw ‘em yerself, even if I was thinking it, can you blame me?...  
Would they have nicked his stuff if he was black?

Furthermore, Lee, a policeman, one of the most rational and coherent characters in the play, tries to balance his own conflicting feelings about his friendship with Mark and the fact that a black man previously stabbed him when he was trying to help him. He is worried about the fact that his thoughts might have become prejudiced against the black community he comes into contact with through his work, as he makes clear in a dialogue with Gina (Williams: 2004; 200, 201):

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<sup>32</sup> Anderson, Paul (1996) “Racism in Sports: a Question of Ethics”; *Marquette Sports Law Review*, Volume 6, Issue 2 Spring

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*

[...] He's my brother, he gets on my tits, but I feel like agreeing with him sometimes. Cos thass the bitta Dad rubbing off on me. But that's not the kind of copper I want to be. But then I'm thinking it's too late. Whenever a black geezer comes up to me now, I'm shaking. I'm angry. / [...] Then he stabbed me. That fucking black bastard stabbed me. I ain't racist but it's how I felt, it's how I still feel, is that so wrong? That bloke tried to kill me, and he got away with it.

The feelings exteriorized by Lee are especially important because he is a policeman. This is significant in a time when the Metropolitan Police is trying to remove racist conduct from its members and when Lee, a police officer who tried to treat everybody the same way regardless of their colour, was stabbed by a black man. This is reinforced by the fact that the person who stabbed him did not receive a punishment for the crime in an ironic inversion of the majority of racially-inspired stabbings. The tension inside the pub grows alongside the tension outside due to the local black protest against the way the pub regulars and the way the police had behaved towards Sandra, the woman who confronted Gina about the way her son was treated in the pub.

The complexity of the racial issues parallels the internal struggles of Mark, one of the main characters in the play. He is a black man questioning his own place in a xenophobic and racist England, feeling that he is not accepted in the country where he was born, after his encounter with his superiors in the army. The irony is that he had been fighting for England because he saw himself as an Englishman who was fighting for his country. However, Mark hasn't always felt this way towards England. On the contrary, he completely identified himself as English and felt he had access to all the privileges of a white Englishman. Symbolically, he had the English flag tattooed on his body, established a relationship with a white woman (Gina), played football with all the regulars of the pub and joined the overwhelmingly white British army. He even supported England in football matches, getting involved in some episodes of low-level hooliganism. His new awareness of his black identity leads him to show his brother that all the regulars at the pub are not his friends, as they were not and are not his. He argues (Williams: 2004; 210) "They do not want us here, Barry". In addition, Mark is a very complex character in what his perspective of race and prejudice is concerned. He looks for racism in every comment made by the pub's customers. He accuses a patron of being racist when he applauded a black player being sent off to the pitch just because of the colour of his skin, when, in fact, the player was playing poorly. He goes beyond this and accuses Gina of breaking off their relationship just because of his skin colour, despite Gina's refusal of such an idea. Mark starts the argument (Williams: 2004; 208):

You wanted to finish with me cos I was black???. // I finished wid you cos you were boring. You were boring in bed, and you were boring to talk to. If you woke up tomorrow as white as I am, you'll still be boring.

According to Barry & Boles, Mark's complexity as a character shows Roy Williams' theatrical maturity because (Barry & Boles: 2006; 308) "he refuses to glorify Mark by putting him on a pedestal above the xenophobia and racism around him. Mark too has the same issues and prejudices to confront, but unlike the men in the bar, he has progressed beyond their limited perspectives, wherein the only answer is violence and hatred". This can also be true for the events in *Fallout*.

Ultimately, Mark, at the end of the play, attempts to stop the racism and prejudice affecting the new generation when he tries to convince Glen to give him the knife, so that the violence inside and outside the bar is not further aggravated. In a brutal scene, Glen stabs Mark to death. This scene is highly symbolic since Mark's death at the hands of the youngest white character in the play shows the continued impact of racism and brutality in British society. Furthermore, the play leads the audience to reflect on the fascist philosophies that, in the end, prevail over rational and unprejudiced behaviour, and which can lead the audience to conclude that there is a strong connection between the sense of nationalism and fascism. In fact, Glen's attitude shows that the younger generations still behave irrationally in committing racist violence. Glen's is an act that shows that little has changed in the English society if the young behave with the same brutality and, therefore, the future regarding this matter will be bleak. As Sierz (2011; 153) concludes, "the play offers little hope for progress in race relations".

Amazingly, the last image in the play is that of Barry, who has behaved apolitically to all the racist comments about him and those of his community. He realizes his apathy led to his brother's death, which leads him to wipe off the flag of Saint George he had painted on his face. This attitude is a sign that Barry will no longer remain in his attitude of apathy and has aligned himself with Mark, fighting, hereafter, against all the acts of racism he faces in the future. However, there's a voice of prudence in the end. (Williams: 2004; 235) "Don't lose yourself", says Lee which is as if he was asking Barry not to let himself be blinded over his brother's death. In fact, Lee pleads with Barry not to disappear (Barry & Boles: 2006; 309) "under the mask of racist, the absolute thinker who is consumed by the simplistic positions of prejudice". This is a very optimistic part contrasting with the pessimistic tone of the end of the play. Lee's last remark shows that the future is uncertain and subject to both positive and negative readings.

In parallel with the theme of racism, the play broaches the theme of national identity. This is illustrated by a dialogue that Mark begins with Alan (Williams: 2004; 218):

I'm English. // No you're not. // I served in Northern Ireland. I swore an oath of allegiance to the flag. // Oh please. // How English are you? Where do you draw the line as to who's English. I was born in this country. And my brother. You're white, your culture comes from northern Europe, Scandinavia, Denmark. Your people moved from there thousands of years ago, long before the Celtic people and the Beaker people, what? You think cos' I'm black, I don't read books. Where do you draw the line? // [...]

The fact is, Mark, that the white British are a majority racial group in this country, therefore it belongs to the white British.

Through this dialogue, the issue of what it means to be English and British is raised for the second of these terms does not necessarily imply the first. The British people were created through the arrival of different peoples from Northern Continental Europe in the British isles, thus creating a new people from different cultures. All these people had some physical characteristics in common, such as white skin and blue eyes, which meant that the mixing of these peoples did not give origin to a different race. Therefore, nowadays, white British people, as they share the same physical characteristics, consider themselves to be the rightful heirs to Britain and Britain as theirs. However, it is important to note that being British means a gathering of different cultures that exist on their own, a conglomerate of geo-political contingencies including the English, the Scottish, the Welsh and the Irish. The British that descend from the first Nordic tribes of settlers, feel that, as they were the first to arrive, they have priority in claiming the land as theirs over the right of the black people who arrived many centuries later. Skin colour is used in the claim to be the rightful heirs of the United Kingdom. However, Mike sees himself as English because he sees nationality in terms of the place people are born and their sense of commitment to that country. Thus, his skin colour is unimportant in the establishment of his sense of English nationality.

To explain this issue of what it means to be English, Dierdre Osborne (2011) points to the dichotomy England and Britain, which is one of the most long-term confusions around English national identity. These concepts present a mystification of identity that needs to be decoded both by the characters and the audience and their concepts may or may not coincide. She adds (Osborne: 2011; 496):

The English/British dichotomy suggests the inclusion/exclusion dynamic wherein patriotic emotion is somehow attached to England and its associations with whiteness, not Britain, a contrived conglomerate of geo-political contingencies. In this equation black British can never be English

or part of its self-appointed hegemony within the countries and islands of the United Kingdom.

In this line, all the black characters in the play are British but they cannot consider themselves to be English as they are not white. However, this concept of English identity related to patriotic feelings and whiteness does not apply to Mark's first statements about his own identity. He claims that he was born in England and that he fought for England in the war in Northern Ireland. Therefore, he senses that he has every right to feel English. In fact, he shares all the characteristics outlined except for the fact that he is black. Britishness and Englishness are contested concepts in the play rather than fixed ones. Multiracial Britain and England have changed the concepts of nation which were regarded as absolute in the past. The presence of other communities in Britain leads people to question those concepts and to debate whether immigrant communities have effective influence in the culture of the United Kingdom.

To this extent, black populations are left outside the concept of 'Us' that forms English identity but not British identity. The hybrid concept of being English arose with the decline of the British Empire, which matched successive waves of migration into Britain of people from the former colonies, such as the Caribbean and people from the various African countries and the Asian from India, Pakistan and East Africa. In his exploration of what it means to be English, Williams calls attention to some characteristics that define and are inherent to English people but in a critical way. The characteristics of Englishness that the author brings to the stage are defined negatively, (Osborne: 2011; 497) "displayed and interlocked through German-hating and black-hating prejudice". German-hating is shown through aggressive male hysteria, in this case violence.

As Roy Williams points out about *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (Sierz: 2000; 8),

I just put all these people in a confined space and watched them do battle. In a way, they're all battling for what they perceive to be their England and that's what the debate is about. And it's still going on today with all the questions about asylum-seekers – what kind of England do we want?

The presence of immigrant communities and asylum-seekers in Britain has had a profound impact on preconceived concepts of England and being English. It is undeniable that all these cultures influence each other and it is no longer possible to draw boundaries around each one. It is important to raise the issues of multiculturalism that influence, nowadays, the concept of being English and redefine outdated concepts. The setting of the play contributes to the violence around the battles on the various issues fought by all the characters. An atmosphere of claustrophobia

tends to produce violence and Roy Williams aimed to show that the discussion around being English is one that is usually accompanied by passion that may lead to death or extreme violence.

To sum up, the play mixes contradictory notions of race and nationality and offers a way of broadening the definition of both, well expressed in the image of Barry with the flag of St. Andrew painted on his face. The existence of the black-British, among other (Sierz: 2011; p. 231) “hyphenated-Britons”, is a key element in the construction of ideas of nation. As Sierz (2011; 231) puts it, “currently, the new Britishness is not a fixed identity, but a state of permanent tension. What’s interesting about hybrids is not that they offer a solution to the puzzles of identity, but that they pose the question of who we are in such a clear way”.

The concepts of being English as well as British have become very personal and hybrid concepts, depending on the concrete experiences of people in particular situations. Nowadays, it is impossible to give a straight definition of being English or British because people experience and define this according to the situations in which they live and the position they hold in society. In other words, the definition of both English and British is contextual rather than essential or biological. Therefore, every person fights and argues for the England and the Britain they perceive to be theirs and that fight, unfortunately, is surrounded by violence with all the subjects implicated in this discussion. Being British is a living question that mutates according to the factors of the present. Therefore, it is a concept in constant alteration because new characteristics and factors are added as new people move into the United Kingdom and influence and are influenced by the British society. With concepts of nation themselves in flux, Williams shows that the state of the nation play is also shifting in terms of content and form in order to respond to the challenges of multicultural Britain.

## Conclusion

Roy Williams has emerged as one of the most imaginative and creative playwrights in black theatre at the forefront of new writing initiatives by a number of state-subsidized theatre structures. These new writing initiatives were part of a general aim to take theatre to new and younger audiences from social groups for whom going to the theatre was previously an experience exclusively for a white cultural autocracy. The presence of this new audience was only possible because contemporary plays by black dramatists such as Roy Williams address current concerns, establishing a bond between the experiences of the audience and the dramatic situations presented in the play.

Williams' motivation in writing theatre has been to fill in a perceived cultural vacuum in British theatre, as he feels that "there are acres of stories from a multicultural perspective that can be told in contemporary drama. So let us hear those stories, in all their complexities".<sup>34</sup> As it is possible to conclude through the analysis of Roy Williams' dramatic output, each of these plays foregrounds stories of social negotiations through the prism of ethnicity, centralizing black characters to dramatize their interactions with members of the white majority contexts they inhabit. The plays take place in a variety of contexts, from an imagined and real Jamaica to the contested public spaces of urban London and deal with characters from a variety of backgrounds and different ages.

The legacy of a Caribbean heritage characterizes Williams' first plays but the Caribbean as a location becomes symbolic of the Old World, with the New World as aspiration and idea. Using his own family history, Williams examines (Barry & Boles: 2006; 298) "the situation of black people in Jamaica and subsequently in Britain and their struggle in choosing between their island heritage and the potential financial opportunities in England". The identity of the characters of these plays is strongly based in the juxtaposition of the two worlds: Jamaica, regarded as imaginary world of fantasy and illusion, and Britain, which becomes the symbol of failed hopes and expectations. Therefore, the characters inhabit the two worlds, constructing their identity through memory. These plays also illustrate the conflict that exists between the first and the second generation of immigrants in terms of belonging and construction of identity, which are translated into different expectations. Whereas the first generation had collective expectations, the concerns of the second and third generations were more individual, as they tried to find their own place in the country where they were born as descendants of immigrants. Finally, in this set of plays, Williams explores

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, Roy "Shades of Black" (2004) [online]. Available at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). Last accessed: 29 August 2012

the importance that diaspora has in the formation of character and identity, requiring a permanent negotiation between 'here' and 'there.' The set that these plays form are the only plays by Williams that are surrounded by a mystic note of fantasy and illusion. The issues presented on stage mix present and past, presenting the juxtaposition of these two different moments in time and allowing the audience to be transported to a past of nostalgia. Personally, these plays are William's most touching work, especially in the way the female characters are presented. The constant search for an identity as well as their permanent negotiation between their sense of belonging and failed dreams transform these women into such complex characters that I found it impossible not to establish a connection with them.

The plays by the playwright that follow these earlier plays focus on black male identity in the second and third generations, showing that pre-existing concepts of these terms must be abandoned, allowing for the recognition of the existence of complex ideas of what it means to be a black British male nowadays. In the presentation of this work, Williams used his own experience as a second-generation immigrant and worked to refute the ideas, built to a large extent by the media, of what it means to be a young black man in Britain. In this discussion, the issue of white young men emulating black ones is raised, demonstrating that the distribution of power associated with colonialism is being questioned and the boundaries between margins and centre becoming flexible with the influence that immigrant cultures have had on British white culture. Moreover, the issue of the identity of young Black men is also being questioned within the black community. Here, the issues of 'shadism' and 'pigmentation' play an important role in questioning notions of racial purity within the black community and are challenged in Williams' plays.

Following the signs of his own time, Williams' next plays portray instantly recognizable teenagers, asking important questions about the construction of identity in a time when pre-conceived social concepts and notions of power are examined through the lens of a multicultural and multiracial society. In this line, Williams presents both white and black young characters who face similar dilemmas because the rigid social structure that existed previously have collapsed, giving place to a space where margins and centre oscillate and redefine the issues that form the preoccupations of British teenagers nowadays, whether white or black. In the broaching of youth dilemmas, Williams' creative output assumes a sociological and an educational role. By exposing audience to the problems of violence on stage, theatre takes on a preventative role, leading the young members that constitute these audiences to question this way of life. Using real situations and real issues on stage, Williams creates works of social realism that instead of being immediate or sensationalized as in the media, give place to reflection and debate.



The playwright's accounts of contemporary British youth ask pertinent questions about identity and the two worlds of street and polite society which can be regarded as a provocative intervention in society's debates about race, class and gender and about what exactly society means in the twenty-first century. Indeed, Williams has been referred to as the playwright whose plays predicted the recent widespread riots by young people in the United Kingdom, suggesting a breakdown of society in this conventional sense. Questioning what it means to be English and to be British, again, Williams demonstrates that these concepts are no longer rigid and that the boundaries between margin and centre have collapsed, giving place to hybrid definitions of these two concepts that are highly influenced by mass culture and in the process creating new meaning for terms like nation and race.

With plays that broach current problems and concerns, Williams has built an unprecedented presence on Britain's mainstream and regional stages and his work stands as a resistance to predominantly white playwrights and audiences. As a black playwright born in Britain, Roy Williams has created a place in the mainstream which was only sporadically possible in the past. In many ways, his work has brought black experience into a position of cultural centrality, challenging rigid parameters of music, sport, and cultural manifestations as traditionally the most visible areas of black cultural citizenship. The subjects of his plays enter debates on indigenous identity and destabilize the demarcations and certainties once associated with being English or British. Far from existing as an alternative to the mainstream, Roy Williams creates a vital vision of national culture constructed from black people's experiences and exposes mainstream audience to aspects of black British cultural experience that are now as indigenous to contemporary British and English cultural identity as those written about by white playwrights. As Elizabeth Barry and William Boles (2006; 312) argue, "if the work of Williams is a gauge, then the first decade of the twenty-first century may soon become recognised as the period when black drama in Britain emerged as a dominant mainstream force".

However, in order for black theatre to be seen as a dominant force of the new millennium, there is the urgent need that it must be regarded as a vibrant area of new writing by critics and scholars, which raises the main obstacle faced in the research and the writing of this Masters thesis. There is little critical literature on black theatre and particularly on Roy Williams. The majority of critical works published before the new millennium focus mainly on the work by white dramatists, leaving black British theatre in the background. The development of black British theatre has never been granted proper historiographical and critical attention and its place in the wider scenery of British drama has always been problematic. It is as if criticism still has to catch up with Williams' move from the margins into the mainstream and counter the cultural vacuum within theatre criticism which has not yet recognized the richness of his work. Theatre criticism must also

accept that the issues he deals with will necessarily change the ways in which criticism of theatre is written. An example would be the linguistic register of his writing, which is very different from many mainstream playwrights and difficult to discuss in conventional critical language.

In this context, continued critical work on Roy Williams is an essential project for the new millennium. This dissertation has only begun to consider some of the issues dealt with in his work. Therefore, black theatre, in particular the work of Roy Williams, and the valuable but reduced critical work produced on these two subjects will continue to be the subject of my investigation and exploration, verifying, as is my strong belief, that the work of black dramatists such as Williams has become a fundamental part of the new millennium theatre culture.

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